

## All the Roofs of Uncertainty

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# All the Roofs of Uncertainty

by [Kieron\\_ODuibhir](#)

## Summary

For all the blood on his hands, Red Hood was never just a villain. And Nightwing never gives up on family, not for good.

(Or: The one where Dick bleeds a lot and Jason argues with everybody.)

## Notes

Set in some never-achieved future point in the pre-Flashpoint continuity, assuming Bruce came home to Gotham to roost well within the year and Dick stopped being Batman. After making good his Arkham escape, Jason got Scarlet set up somewhere she wouldn't be traced to him this time, and has been avoiding both Gotham and capes for a while, mostly traveling around assassinating international crime figures.

No superheroes or Pink Floyd songs are mine.

# The Rain Fell Slow

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jason could still hear the crash and boom of battle on the other side of the hill, but he didn't charge off in that direction like he'd just seen the latest Kid Flash do.

What was a kid that age even doing here? Made him feel old. Or maybe that was just fatigue. He'd been fighting for almost two hours without a break before this part of the field cleared, and was getting pretty low on ammo and completely out of explosives. A lull was acceptable.

So far as Jason could tell, nobody was seriously worried that these idiots could actually conquer the planet. Their landing sites had been staggered widely enough to spread the Justice League pretty thin, but that just meant the effort to box them in and minimize collateral damage slowed down the utter destruction of the invasion a little. The enemy was retreating; Red Hood could afford to approach slowly, catch his breath, and take up a sniping position.

He picked his way calmly over the scorched grass and twisted robot parts, and the occasional unlucky alien corpse. One stirred, and he put a bullet into what he'd finally established was a close equivalent to a brain. Nothing deserved the kind of experiments Waller or her ilk would put this thing through if it survived.

Getting involved in a minor world war hadn't really been on his schedule for the week, but he'd been in the area; that was, in Philadelphia getting a cheese steak, close enough to this landing zone to hear when things started blowing up. Getting deputized by the JLA on the basis that he looked like he knew what he was doing and Nightwing was willing to vouch for him (in a very limited sense that still made him a moron) had *really* not been on the agenda, but hey. The Bat would probably be really pissed about it later. Win.

Another massive explosion ripped out over the hill, and he picked up the pace slightly. The forces still on the ground were basically just a rearguard to make sure the retreating ships had time to get away, but those bombardier-beetle tanks were fucking annoying, and if there were still some operational over there, the Leaguers could use a sniper.

Seriously, this planet had saved the multiverse from Darkseid not that long ago. Earth had proven itself better defended than *Oa*.

Admittedly even one universe was an incomprehensibly vast place, and it made sense that most inhabited worlds had never heard of most other inhabited worlds, but if they were attacking here they had to be *relatively* local. Hadn't at least most of the high-tech Milky Way clued in yet?

"Ngrh," said something to his left, and he detoured slightly, expecting to do another mercy-kill.

Sprawled in a large impact crater that he probably hadn't made was the black-and-blue form of Nightwing.

Previously the second Batman, showing no regrets about doffing the cowl that Jason had heard, Justice League reserve member in excellent standing, definitely down. He looked scorched around the edges, had both hands clamped over his right side, and was gritting his teeth. Red Hood paused for a second, and then kept walking. Nightwing looked at him as soon as it didn't require twisting around, and gave a nod of acknowledgement. Didn't seem alarmed to have an Arkham escapee coming at him.

Red Hood came to a halt in about the middle of the crater, looking down at the injured hero, and after a few seconds lightly kicked the bottom of one black boot. "Well, you look like shit," Jason greeted.

"Thanks, you too," Nightwing joked, rather breathlessly. He'd lost his mask at some point, but it didn't matter much even if someone hostile was spying, because the massive bruising over most of the left side of his face and the dramatic scrapes running down the other side left him quite unrecognizable as Dick Grayson, unless you knew to look, or knew him pretty well. No League earpiece, either, which explained why no one had come to pick him up yet.

Jason frowned. There was a pool of blood under Nightwing...and it was growing. He maybe wasn't holding onto his side just because it hurt. He crouched, giving the battered spandex crusader an efficient once-over. It was much too easy to pry his right hand from the damage to his abdomen to get a look at it, and there was another deep slice in his thigh which Jason swore aloud when he located. "You dumbshit," he snapped at Grayson, leaning his full weight on the spot. "You got cut down to the femoral artery and you were just *lying* there?"

"I was working on...sitting up," Nightwing defended himself, sounding more facetious than anything.

Jason rolled his eyes, and took his left hand off the wound for long enough to pull out the specialized comm he'd been loaned for the day. They'd offered him an earbud, but helmet. Kind of a no-starter. Not that he especially *wanted* superhero comm chatter in his ear.

"Red Hood to League, man down, calling for time-critical emergency medical support. That's *Nightwing* down, you..." He ended the transmission without an insult at the last minute and shoved the thing back into his pocket, going back to keeping up pressure with both hands. The pool of blood had mostly stopped expanding, now, but blood had pumped insistently if much slower over his one hand. With two, it seeped.

Jason gritted his teeth and pushed Nightwing somewhat onto his side to give him a better angle for pressure, trying to ignore the way he was probably exacerbating organ damage. If Grayson's circulatory system got too low on fluids to keep him ticking, whatever had happened to his liver and kidneys would be moot. And why did he even care?

The sound of the fight over the hill was still ongoing, but he'd heard that bombardier-tank blow, and someone would be able to answer his hail soon enough, so he'd just keep pretty-boy alive till then, and they could owe him. Being owed would be cool.



Nightwing was looking at him. Without a mask it was perfectly obvious. Jason glared back. "Hey, Jay?" said his idiot patient. Already sounding deeply hazy. He was chalk-white under his bruises. "Do me a favor?"

"What do you call *this*?" Jason snapped, jerking his head toward his hands.

"Yeah, thanks," the hero allowed, less sarcastic than before. He smiled distractedly. "Personal favor?" he asked.

Oh, so the life-saving medical assist fell into public-sector favors? Okay, Jason could see where that was coming from, especially from Grayson who would do this for *literally anyone* and not ask for anything afterward, and probably expected the same from everyone else. Red Hood snorted. "Who do you think you're talking to?"

"My...little brother."

"Blood loss is making you crazy, goldie," said Jason roughly. Of course Grayson would say something like that when asking for a *favor*. There was literally no one in the Bat family he had not made a creditable attempt at killing. Well, except the girls.

Dick huffed out a breathy sound that might have been a laugh. "I've got practice working through it. Humor me. If I don't die, you can just pretend this never happened."

"I'm doing that either way, Nightwing." Unless any useful debts arose from it, and even then....

The hero's eyelids fluttered. "You...don't have to stay, Jay." He could be playing the martyr, but he sounded honestly accepting. Like he was okay with bleeding out alone before his League buddies got here, for the heroic cause of Jason fucking off. It seemed like he didn't think he had a chance. Which made this stupid personal favor a *last request*.

Red Hood snarled. "Just get on with it before you pass out."

A weak smile pulled at Grayson's mouth and he pulled his left hand from holding his injured side and groped a little before coming down on top of Jason's wrist. "Take care of them?"

"Oh, come *on*."

"You'll be the oldest if I'm gone," Nightwing persisted. "Tim will take care of everyone except himself, and Damian's still a kid, and Cass deals with things like grief by going off alone, and..."

He trailed off. For a second Jason thought he'd passed out, but it seemed like he'd just been switching gears from Big Brother mode over to general mother henning. "Babs will withdraw, and Bruce..." Jason stiffened more than before, but didn't dig his fingers into the slashed muscle. It was a near thing. *Bruce*. Golden Bird couldn't be serious. "Shouldn't be as bad as last time," Grayson continued breathily. "But I wasn't there for him then, and I...regret that, now."

"You want me to help him cope with losing you because you didn't stick around after *I* died?" Jason repeated. It came out a little too incredulous to call sneering.

Another weak huff of a laugh, a flash of even white teeth smeared slightly with blood. Hopefully, a cut lip. "Pretty much. Selfish, huh? It's okay if you...don't want to. Just...the younger ones, at least?"

"I don't think you really want to leave them to my guidance, goldie."

"Definitely don't want to leave. Just...take care of them?" Two spots of reflected light reappeared as Grayson levered his eyes open with a great effort. "Donna said you...so say bye for me? And Wally and his kids, tell them sorry about the birthday thing, and Roy, and Kori, they..."

"I am not running all over the planet playing messenger boy, you delusional circus freak," Jason cut him off.

"S'okay...I filed a will in the computer...updated pretty recently. Not as dumb as Bruce's," the bleeding man added, his tone a sort of petulant irritation mixed with pride. "Got stuff for...most people. Wasn't likely to die in bed, ya know? Babs or someone will take care of it."

Jason felt a rage that had only just taken abrupt light at the mention of video-wills die off before it could really build, when Grayson dismissed the damn thing. Yes, Bruce's will was stupid, agreed, *ignore*. Also, defeatist much? Already talking about himself in the past tense, really?

"Real will...with Rae...y'r still legally dead, so she wouldn't let me put you in it..."

Jason snorted. "What exactly were you even trying to give me? I'll take your bike," he added generously. "I figure with a bit of re-customizing..."

"Jerkass," Dick grinned, like he hadn't spent ages rebuilding the thing into his idea of a perfect motorcycle. His cool hand on Jason's wrist pressed a little, and then slid to the ground. His eyes had closed again at some point when Jason hadn't been looking. "You can have Nigh'wing, tho. If you want."

"Fuck off," Jason growled. He might have been moved by the magnanimity of the offer, if he hadn't tried to steal the name for that couple of months in New York a while back, in the attempt to get under Grayson's skin. It had worked, too. "Doesn't little mister Identity Theft have first dibs anyway?"

"Nah..." Grayson didn't elaborate, though his limp hand on the ground twitched a few times, like he wanted to pat Jason's.

Jason was still incredulous Drake had adopted the Red Robin suit he'd picked up on Earth-51. Sure, he'd stopped using it himself after the Crisis, but really? Well, the kid had probably never had an original thought in his life. Maybe he would take Nightwing after all, just to

stick it to the Pretender. Though would anyone actually believe him, if he claimed the original had made a bequest of the suit in his deathbed speech?

Oh, and now Grayson had *him* doing it. He pressed down a little harder, stemming just a little more of the seep. Damn. He was in excellent shape, but the muscles in his hands were still starting to protest keeping up this constant pressure. Like the asshole had the right to die on him. Batman would probably beat Red Hood into a coma on the spot if he was found over the body with Dick's blood on his hands.

"Stay awake, birdbrain. Can I have the bike or not?"

"Lemme think about it."

Jason gave it two dozen heartbeats before he prompted, "Nightwing?"

One eye half-opened, with some effort. "Don' think I...c'n talk much more."

"Fine, then. Shut up."

"You talk."

"About what?" Jason had never considered himself bad with words, but he was only a motormouth when he had a major axe to grind, and seriously, if the Golden Bird expected Jason to *ramble* at him....

"kay." That same friendly smile flickered onto the damaged face again. Mortician was going to have a great time making *that* look pretty, but then, the Wayne family's traditional funeral parlour had managed it for Jason, who'd been beaten *and* exploded. (Jason felt his flesh creep and dismissed again the fact that before he'd been resurrected he'd been *embalmed*. He'd woken with normal blood in his veins. Whatever that meant.)

"Sing, then," Grayson proposed.

What, he wanted a lullabye? Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest, yeah, right. "There's a reason you've never heard my singing voice, 'Wing."

"Not th'most...musical birds, are we?" The sonuvabitch was *still smiling*. "Hum, maybe?"

"Stop talking," Jason ordered, hating the slur in Nightwing's voice.

"Hum?"

Jason shook his head. He honestly wanted to be hummed at. How was it that a guy respected by *pretty much everyone* could be such a goofy moron? "If it'll shut you up," he grumbled, and found he could only think of one song. It was low and simple and good for humming, and if Grayson knew the lyrics, he figured that was a plus.

*Why did we tell you that...you were always the golden boy?*

It should be loud enough for the bleeding bird to hear, Jason judged, even as he kept it low to avoid drawing the attention of any hostiles skulking away from the continuing melee on the other side of the hill. Distant crashes in his ears, and the wind, and his own thin voice, and the original music playing in his head, set to the beat of the artery under Jason's fingers as it fought an earnest, slowly successful battle for suicide. *And that you'd never lose that light in your eyes?*

There was no more bright spot of an eye peering at him. Jason wasn't sure if Dick was still listening, but the rise and fall of his chest kept up, and the weak pulse against his fingers. And all he could do was keep humming, keep pressing, and wait while time ran out.

*I never thought you'd lose that light in your eyes.*

## Chapter End Notes

(True story: First draft of this fic composed in tiny letters on the back of a receipt, while waiting in an exam room for the cardiologist to come back with a prognosis for my heart condition. It turned out that if it hasn't killed me yet, it probably won't.)

# So Wrong for You

## Chapter Notes

Note that Jason is sometimes an unreliable narrator. (Also for any Bat fans who don't keep track of the rest of the universe: Wally West and his wife had twins sometime around Infinite Crisis. Dick mentioned them last chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sound of Jason's own humming covered up a lot of the fainter calls and crashes from away over the hill.

Closer at hand, it did a little less against the occasional crumbling of broken stone and the ongoing collapse of what had once been a red-brick elementary school, evacuated in plenty of time but still rather forlorn, and the grumbling of sullen crimson fires in the bellies of demolished alien craft. It didn't matter. No one was listening.

Jason was patient. When he wanted to be he was goddamn *methodical*. He could scheme. For all he was known for recklessness and rush, he could hold a stakeout position longer than Nightwing, or any of the replacements. *If* he decided he wanted to. There was no way Dickiebird's body was going to hold out longer than Jason's ability to focus.

If this bird was going to die in a hole, Jason was going to be there the whole time.

He caught himself working out how to convince Grayson's family that he hadn't been in much pain, and growled to himself, and kept humming, because fuck that. Where was backup? Was his stupid communicator not working, or something? Was there anything more useless than the Justice League? Maybe he should have tried to get a tourniquet to work from the beginning. Though if Nightwing lived through this but had one leg amputated, he sure wouldn't be thanking Jason for his role in it. On the whole, he'd take angry Batman over watching Grayson self-destruct because of clipped wings.

Idiot.

*(And did you know...?)*

Dick was still breathing when the tiny speedster from earlier reappeared over the crest of the hill and came to a dead stop, staring down at them. No longer in motion, this little Flash in red and white was the smallest sidekick Jason had ever seen, with a tousled mane of orange hair. Little lips shaped the word *Nightwing*, and actually, that was *clearly* a little girl.

"Get someone down here, kid," Jason shouted up at her, voice even more gravelly than usual. He was never humming again for the rest of his life. "Preferably a medic."

Kid Flash disappeared.

A few seconds later, Jason looked up from the acrobat's inner thigh to find himself loomed over by an adult Flash—he couldn't tell which one, though unless there'd been another freak aging accident or something, it was either West or the older Allen—and *Superman*. Of all people.

At least neither of them had jumped to stupid conclusions and punched him. Being punched to death by Superman for a misunderstanding would be a real capper to a messed-up life.

"Is either of you a medic?" he asked dryly. Didn't wait for them to answer. "Get something for a pressure bandage," he ordered. He'd be lying if he said he didn't enjoy having a good excuse to tell Superman what to do.

It was Flash who disappeared, and came back a second later with an *actual* pressure bandage, so Jason nodded at Superman. "Get over here, I need a second pair of hands."

Neither hero argued. Jason and Superman got the dressing fixed tightly around Nightwing's thigh with minimal extra bleed, super-strength and super-speed coming in very handy there, while Flash investigated the mess of blood that was the belly wound.

"Some serious organ damage here," he declared heavily, and vanished again.

Probably West, then. Allen wouldn't have ignored Superman that completely. The younger speedster had never had his uncle's confidence, far as Jason could tell, but he wasn't great at hierarchies and got rude when he was focused on something, and he and Nightwing were friends. Nightwing had worked 'Wally and his kids' into his dying diatribe, even. Jason hadn't known either Flash well enough to tell by voice, but he decided that analysis was pretty solid.

He had time to stand up, rubbing disgustedly at the tacky blood on his sore hands and trying to dismiss the phantom sensation of a flagging pulse against his fingertips, before the Flash zipped back into view with an ungainly pair of canvas-wrapped poles swinging over his shoulder.

The patient's breath hitched slightly. Jason should probably leave.

"He should lie flat," Flash told Superman, unrolling the stretcher. "Transport's coming."

Superman nodded, and without need of further discussion the two of them lifted Grayson ever so carefully out of the small lake of his own blood, swung him a foot and a half to the left, and laid him out belly-up. Jason let them handle it, stood back keeping an eye out for the promised transport, and noticed the little speedster, who'd fetched such serious firepower when what he'd *asked* for was a medic.

She was standing even further back, halfway up a heap of brick rubble, staring at the slack way Grayson's head lolled against the stretcher. She was white as a sheet, almost as white as Count Bloodloss himself, and biting at her lip fretfully.

"Hey, kiddie Flash."

The little girl—was she even ten?—scowled at him with half her attention. "Nobody gets it right. Kid Flash is my second cousin. I'm *Impulse*."

"Whatever." That might explain the dearth of yellow in her gear. He'd never really paid much attention to the Flashes. "You're one of the West kids?"

He had all her attention, suddenly, as well as most of Flash's and a lot of Superman's, the former with that furious protective crouch that only parents got, which was the last word in hypocrisy, if the asshole was letting his little daughter flash around battlefields in spandex. Couldn't the warning Jason had given the world by dying in costume have been remembered a *little* longer? But no, Batman had gone and gotten another Robin in the saddle within the year, and everyone had done their best to forget.

Jason would *love* to pick a fight, but he didn't have the supplies or the groundwork laid to take on even *one* of these guys head-to-head, so his options if he tried would reduce to running away and hoping no one chased him, or managing to take the dying guy hostage. (He wasn't above taking child hostages, but kids that could move faster than a bullet and vibrate through solid objects weren't viable prisoners. Not without actually hurting them, and he had *some* standards.)

And then he'd be the bad guy again, and he wanted what he'd done today *acknowledged*, dammit, not just swept under the rug like everything else about him.

So he just looked from father to daughter, and jerked his chin toward Nightwing. "He said 'sorry about the birthday thing.'"

Impulse burst into tears.

In a literal instant, her father was at her side, leaving Superman to stand guard alone. Babbling in superspeed was apparently a thing Flashes did when upset, but Jason did catch a choked: "Like we *care* about getting to go to the circus if he—!"

"He's gonna be okay, Irey," Flash was promising, like an idiot, and Jason rolled his eyes and strolled back over toward Superman, who nodded an acknowledgement. Apparently that was what the cool superheroes did now.

There was a hint of wariness in his expression, which was pretty funny because Jason had no superpowers and had just gone to a good bit of trouble to save the same life the Man of Steel was currently guarding. Sure, he'd also just made a little girl cry, but it wasn't like he'd even been *mean*. Wasn't his fault she was worried about Nightwing. Was the boy scout expecting a sudden onslaught of Kryptonite?

"Jason," Superman greeted. Jason jumped a little. Almost invisibly, but *he'd* have seen. Dammit.

Shouldn't be surprised, really. Superman might not be the control freak Batman was, but he *was* a snoopy reporter with super-senses, and was on fairly good terms with the Bats. Dickiebird might have told him all about it, upfront. Or it could have been some aggregation

of gossip; his resurrection wasn't exactly a secret Jason'd gone to any real trouble to keep, not for a while now.

"Clark," he returned drily. Addressing Jason that directly might have been intended to make any of several points, including a reprimand about mentioning the Flash's family name like he just had, but if Superman could call *him* by his first name, he could damn well reply in kind.

It took the big, calm man by surprise, a tiny recoil, and Jason felt a thrill of spiteful satisfaction at that. Hah. He'd never really weaponized all the insider information from his Robin days half as much as he could have, but he'd been one of them, once. He *knew* things like Superman's real name. Blackmailing him would obviously not go well, especially when you were already an escaped felon, and Jason wasn't evil enough to out Superman's secret ID just for the hell of it, but making him squirm could be *fun*.

Rather than answer, though, the alien abruptly lost interest in Jason and looked sharply down at Nightwing, features tightening. "Flash, are you sure about that medical transport? I *can* carry him."

Still cradling his little girl against his chest even though she'd dropped to a furious sniffing, clearly one of those kids who hated to cry, let alone be seen doing it, West looked over at Superman and then Nightwing, and bit his lip. "She said she'd be *right* here." His hand flashed up to his comm, and then apparently he heard something reassuring, as his expression cleared and he stood up, keeping only one hand on his daughter's back. Superman heard it, too, whatever it was, and his shoulders unbent very slightly, even as he returned worried eyes to Nightwing's chest.

"His heart?" guessed Jason flatly, watching the still, battered face. He knew Superman had no trouble distinguishing individual heartbeats, because Batman had once warned him not to try lying to Superman until he'd gotten better at biofeedback; it made sense the man was monitoring his loyal fanboy's heart at a time like this.

Dick continued to look pale and unconscious, but the pressure bandage seemed to be holding. There was no spreading stain on the stretcher. His breathing sounded...fine. No worse, at least. Shallow, but it had been like that for a while. Jason didn't have super-hearing, though. "Is it going?"

"Slowing," Superman replied curtly. Looked up, and that was all the warning there was before a sleek, triangular black vehicle rippled into view as it dropped some kind of cloaking device, sank out of the sky and settled onto the nearest moderately-flat piece of ground. Jason knew for a fact that there was an alien corpse being crushed under the landing gear, but it wasn't like that mattered.

The back-hooked shape of the wings were as clear as a signature. This would be the latest Batwing, apparently. Or some kind of cargo-hauling variant. Last he'd seen they were still using a tricked-out conventional jet. Big improvement on the old one-man minicopter, that was for sure.



By the time the hatch on the back had folded down, revealing a total stranger in bright purple scrubs maneuvering a gurney down the newly-created ramp, Superman and Flash had carefully raised the stretcher between them. The medic, a burly blond guy of maybe thirty, rolled his eyes when he saw that, and manhandled his gurney up into the ship again, where he bent over and locked the wheels into some kind of mechanism in the floor. Maybe this had been designed as a medical transport after all. Bat-medevac.

Flash and Superman kept Dickiebird very level as they got him up the ramp, and then laid him down on blond-in-purple's gurney with the kind of exaggerated care associated with ancient artifacts and newborn babies. Jason rolled his eyes. It might be justified, but seriously, Nightwing was injured, not made of china, and he was way too unconscious to feel pain. The blond medic and another, a skinny redheaded woman with a dark, solemn face, closed in immediately for a second, more professional round of triage. They did not look happy with his heart rate.

Superman hovered, both literally and figuratively. "I can't stay," he told Flash.

Of course not. Alien invasion was still in the process of being repulsed; of *course* Superman couldn't follow one hero to the hospital. That he even bothered looking apologetic about it was kind of ridiculous. "If anything changes..."

"I'll make sure someone keeps you informed," Flash promised. Superman nodded gratefully, tore his eyes off Nightwing, and jetted off to save somebody's day, with another nod toward Jason that he didn't bother to return. He could see why every tourist trap in Metropolis sold Superman bobbleheads.

Once the alien was gone, Flash stood on the ramp, at Nightwing's feet, for a second, fists as tight as his tiny sidekick's, who was now sporting a red nose and square-jawed mulish expression. He reached out a little, then seemed to feel the ridiculousness of trying to reassure someone who was completely unaware of you, and let it drop.

"I'll meet you there," he announced after a second, though it was unclear whether he was addressing the unconscious Nightwing, the medics, or possibly the Bat-hoverambulance. "I have some errands to run on the way." He grasped his daughter's hand and they disappeared in a blur. He'd probably beat the flying ambulance to wherever it was going.

"You coming?" growled the blond medic, without looking up from cutting Nightwing out of his Kevlar. He managed a startling resemblance to Batman in the delivery, and Jason realized *he* was the only one left the guy could be asking.

He opened his mouth to say no, then paused. Ground his teeth. Going over the hill and finding a few more aliens to kill sounded kind of appealing, but there were almost no sounds of violence left, and neither Superman or the Flash had thought this battle was worth their time. And if he left now, no one was going to bother to tell him if the asshole went and died.

*You can have Nightwing, though. If you want.*

Needed to make sure to press his claim, if it came to that. Though he was really perfectly happy with his helmet.

"Yeah."

The ramp folded up while he was still walking on it, and then the transport lifted off with barely a jolt.

"Blood type?" the redheaded medic demanded. She at least cut her eyes sharply toward him as she asked. There was already a thick needle in Grayson's arm, ready to feed fluids into him.

"Uh, O. Positive," Jason added, more than a little taken aback that she thought he would know. He *did* know, but only because he'd had a phase of trying to be just like Dick Grayson, and with the man making himself scarce in those days, his profile in the Bat-computer had been the most easily accessed source, with blood type listed right at the top with the other basic data. He'd discretely pumped Alfred and, occasionally, Bruce for stories and tips, but he'd been trying to be subtle. It wouldn't do him much good to pull off the resemblance if Bruce knew he was trying for it, he'd thought at the time. He probably had known, though.

And when Jason finally had stopped trying so hard, pretty soon he'd gotten himself suspended, and then killed.

"You sure?" the woman confirmed sharply, to her credit, even as she was opening a cooler compartment in the outer wall full of blood bags.

"Yes."

"Family?"

"Yeah," Jason confirmed, as he drifted around, off the patch of floor that opened into a ramp, behind the woman, where he could get his back to a wall. He had no idea what kind of medical establishment he'd just walked into the open arms of, but he knew the usual rules. Only family allowed to visit. Secret identities probably made that pretty hard to enforce.

"He's my brother."

"Blood supply is limited," said the blond guy, who seemed to be packing chemical heat-packs around his patient's sides and limbs. (If they were worried about heat, they probably shouldn't have taken all his clothes, but access to injuries was probably important. Sadly, Nightwing's briefs were not patterned with anything hilarious; they were just blue. Jason could probably get about one dig out of 'blue.') The industrious medic didn't look up across the gurney as he asked, "Can you spare him some?"

"Sorry," Jason demurred. There was a sort of bench-shelf thing running up the side of the ship, only half filled with medical gear, and he took a seat on it, crossed his ankles. "AB-plus."

Redheaded medic grunted at him disapprovingly, as though he should have arranged events around his own conception to match the protein markers in his blood to Grayson's, and got the transfusion running. The gurney had a handy little IV stand that folded up out of the side to hold the blood bag and the blood-dark tube snaking down from it, along with the same kind of hand-pump bulb you saw on a blood-pressure cuff, which she squeezed several times

both before and after she connected the lines to the arterial catheter. She then watched arm and bag intently, prodding the latter with a finger, which Jason guessed was a super scientific way to see how fast it was emptying.

Her colleague meanwhile bent over the gut-wound with a look of furious concentration, which didn't falter as the woman's sharp dark features snapped to the far side of the little ship at a sudden thrashing motion.

Jason watched with interest as she apparently deemed Dick adequately stabilized and hurried over to the other gurney, to convince a newly semi-conscious black kid in a blue mask not to try to move any of his three broken limbs, or aggravate the crushed ribs, and that being strapped down *really was* a medical necessity, and no, he was not being kidnapped. Really.

He could see why they'd wanted a ride-along passenger who knew their other patient, now. Superheroes were the paranoid type, and sedating them wasn't the safest, when so many had abnormal physiology.

Nightwing's breathing skipped a little as blondie tugged scraps of shredded Kevlar out of his gut with tweezers, but in a my-body-hates-pain way, not an I'm-dying way. Jason had heard a lot of dying breaths.

"Which hospital are we heading for?" he asked, over the argument from across the jet. (The kid had started coughing, kept trying to gesticulate with his bad arm, well-maintained dreadlocks lashing.)

From the comm-chatter he'd heard last time he'd been paying attention, civilian casualties had been kept very low, so there shouldn't be a massive run on medical facilities, but hospitals were a nightmare to secure, and anywhere multiple capes were laid out helpless might be a target for any number of hostile parties. He should maybe hang around just as a guard, because there was no way he was saving Grayson's life and then letting someone else kill him before he could cash in the favor.

"Caldera Epsilon," replied the blond man, which sounded like the name of no hospital Jason had ever heard of.

He settled back against the wall, propping his elbow on a defibrillator. "How long?"

The medic grinned to himself under his surgical mask, like there was a joke Jason wasn't in on. "Five, ten minutes."

Apparently he'd now done everything he could do for Nightwing's mashed organs, because he broke out some sheets of sterile gauze and began layering them over the wound, presumably to keep any more nastiness from getting into it than was already there.

Across the ship, the female medic gave up and sedated her teenaged patient before he put a bone splinter through a lung. "That was half his preoperative secobarbital," she growled, noting this on a tablet with a *beep-boop*, presumably for the benefit of a hospital anaesthetist. "One-fifty mil. If he's allergic, I take full responsibility."

The other medic had only just acknowledged this with a sharp nod when a hiss arose from the nearer gurney, and before Jason could stand up to see whether Nightwing had opened his eyes, a bruised hand, stripped of its glove, had jerked up in a clumsy grab at the front of the blond medic's scrubs, just missing as the man shied back.

"Where," Nightwing gasped. His hand dropped, its resources exhausted. At least it had been the one without the IV, although it now seemed to be trying to crawl across his chest to investigate the sharp pain in his far elbow, or possibly with the fully-formed intention of pulling the needle out. Waking up to confusion and pain, with no mask, no clothes, and a stranger in a surgical mask looming over him had not gone over well. If he'd had the strength, hero-boy would already have bolted. Not *far*, with the whole moving-aircraft thing, but the point stood.

"Justice League ambulance," the medic told him, round-eyed and well out of reach. "You need to stay still. Your brother is right here, he can tell you, everything's in order."

He motioned urgently to Jason, who grimaced to himself, but stood. Gotta maintain the cover story. Just before he leaned into Nightwing's range of vision he realized that there was no way his helmet was ever going to be a reassuring sight. Would the medics think it was weird if their patient thought his 'brother' was here to kill him? He didn't want today to end in his being shipped back to Arkham.

"Hey, Dickiebird," he opened instead, as soothing as he knew how to be, which wasn't very, putting a little pressure on a relatively unbruised spot on Grayson's left shoulder. No way the moron should try to sit up. "Don't freak out there, bro. You're okay."

Which, okay, blatant lies, but with no idea whether Dick remembered Jason being there when he passed out, or the way he'd seemed so sure he was going to die...yeah, popping up to calm down a guy you had a history of ambushing was a great plan.

Nightwing's face wrinkled in confusion, but the panic responses fell a little. "Jay...?" he hazarded at last.

"Yeah, that's me. Your pal Superman and your favorite Flash handed you over to these nice people that wear too much purple, so just relax before you start bleeding to death again or something."

"You were dead," Nightwing protested, apparently failing to absorb most of that. Which, seriously? Jason's voice had fallen like three octaves since he was fifteen, and they'd probably seen each other more since he'd come back than they had before, and the guy wasn't even on good drugs yet, unless there was something in the bloodpack. Which, unlikely. It was convenient, this confusion, but Jason was still a little...miffed. The space cadet tried to turn his head to get a look at Jason, but couldn't quite manage it.

Jason let go of his shoulder in favor of nudging Dick's face back into position with his knuckles. "Yeah, yeah. But I came back, remember? Don't move, dumbass."

"Oh," said Nightwing intelligently. His eyelids fluttered, those stupid girly lashes failing to manage their usual ladykiller routine with the swollen and blackening right cheek and eye.

"Good."

"Not so much," Jason grumbled, but the bird seemed to have drifted off again. His color was looking a little less pasty, maybe. He wasn't quite as pale as gauze.

The blond medic was already checking both injuries for new bleeding. Probably heard patients be confused about stranger things than dead relatives all the time.

"He'll be fine," Jason said. "He woke up." The medic grimaced. Jason raised his eyebrows. (Not that they could see it, but just because it wasn't useful was no reason not to do something.) "That bad?"

"Talk to his doctor," was all the answer he got. "It's going to come down to surgery."

"For both of them," the woman added from across the ship. "Get a blanket over him," she ordered her colleague, irritated. "And watch the pressure bag, he'll need a new unit soon."

"That's a sixteen-gauge needle, isn't it?" demanded blondie, even as he rushed slightly guiltily to pull a blue fleece blanket out of another cupboard and lay it over Nightwing. His colleague confirmed that it was, while he pumped the squeazy-thing one more time and added some more chem-packs under the blanket. The redhead came over to get some blood out of cold storage for dreadlock-boy, who must have internal bleeding, and they argued briefly about rapid infusers, whatever those were.

Jason stayed out of the way.

Just as they had begun to subside to monitoring pulses and cleaning blood off skin with sterile wipes, a loud tone sounded, two disconcertingly cheerful notes. "Landing," the burly medic announced, clearly for Jason's benefit.

"Can we get a visual?" the redhead asked the ceiling. Apparently in response, the floor under their feet became transparent. Jason instinctively grabbed the nearest piece of furniture, which happened to be Nightwing's gurney. Well, *that* would have been *really* useful if the floor had actually disappeared.

He pretended not to see the medics smirking, and took advantage of the giant underfoot window to take in their destination.

They had hovered down into a massive cave complex, open only at the very top—limestone erosion caverns, had to be, although he didn't see any stalagmites. The geology was right for limestone caves, in these old hills, and totally wrong for volcanic activity, so maybe the name was meant to be simultaneously descriptive and misleading. The place was much smaller than any real caldera Jason knew of, given those generally formed when mountains exploded, but it completely *dwarfed* the Batcave.

Eh. He'd seen bigger.

Across the middle of the floor were spread a network of white cubes—a modular base, the fancy kind. Clusters of prefabbed rooms were linked by semitransparent tunnels that were

probably airtight, and the vague forms of people scurried up and down them and across open stone, mostly toward the helipad directly below them.

"Like I said," grinned the blond medic as he did something to the tubing in Nightwing's arm with a tool that looked like a pair of wire-cutters. "Caldera Epsilon."

The medics didn't pay much more attention to him as they prepped their patients to be rolled out of the vehicle—Dickiebird got a new blood bag—but did confirm that they'd been called in and the facility assembled stat about seven hours ago, as part of a League support protocol that now activated whenever the reserve members like Nightwing were called up. This might not be a planetary *crisis* by modern standards, but that meant that it *could* be handled without going into panic mode and letting the collateral pile up.

Jason figured he approved. Cape morale was *still* recovering from the massive one-two punch of Darkseid's final offensive followed by the super-zombie uprising. The spandex game was for suckers, but he was pretty sure the world would end if the supply of suckers ran out.

Plus dead heroes were actually really depressing.

(As zombies and not as zombies. He was the only resurrected person he knew of that *hadn't* been turned into a zombie, actually. Not sure whether he'd been beneath the Black Lantern's notice, or whether whatever had brought him back had left him outside their sphere of influence. Probably the first one. It wasn't like it took a magic ring to make him attack the Bats, after all, and they wouldn't be shocked if zombie-Jason did.)

As they set down, the support team he'd seen below closed in, dividing in two and dragging the two insensible patients off along with their charts. Jason stalked after Grayson.

Nobody objected all the way across the cave floor, or as they entered the nearest and largest cluster of prefabbed polymer blocks, which bore a discrete plate designating them 'Surgery,' or in the first interior room, which was small and empty and seemed to serve no purpose besides connecting the entrance to a long hallway-like chamber with doors studding one wall and a pair of swinging ones at the far end. Only as he tried to follow the gurney through the swinging doors did one particularly faceless member of the crew free himself from the diagnostic gabble to bar the way.

"I'm sorry," stated the weary man in the surgical mask and goggles, who clearly wasn't, as Nightwing vanished into the depths of the trauma facility and the masked kid rolled after him. "Only medical staff are permitted past this point. For the patients' safety. That's final."

Jason growled to himself. He would dearly love to punch this asshole, who clearly thought medicine was the only exhausting profession in the world, but he couldn't really afford to cause a scene, and he did actually grasp the concept of a sterile environment. Although this particular door clearly wasn't the boundary of that, and stopping him here was probably just a procedural thing. "Fine," he snapped, and the orderly-or-whatever was already disappearing through the double doors before the word was all the way out.

Jason folded his arms and leaned back against the wall, which took his weight without sagging. Back to the waiting game, apparently. Well, that was fine. He was good at waiting.

He hadn't been there five minutes before the same man hurried out the doors again, and did a double take at him. "What, you're still *here*? Get cleaned up a little, at least. The facilities are clearly marked over beside Operations. There are vending machines around the back," he added, looking sidelong at Jason, as he ducked through one of the four unmarked doors.

Jason slightly downgraded his mental asshole rating and went to find these 'facilities.' They were indeed clearly marked, a small huddle of white plastic rooms with the 'male' symbol on the left entrance and 'female' on the right. There turned out to be shower stalls, which Jason did not use, and toilets, which he did.

He stripped off his gloves and dropped them in the steel sink with the water running over them and coming away red-brown, and reached up to unclasp his helmet. He set it aside, splashed some water on his face, and only then took a moment to meet his own eyes in the strip of mirror set above the taps. It had been years since the green of the Lazarus Pit had startled him looking back, months since he'd expected dark hair, but he looked more tired than he liked. Yay helmets.

He washed his face and hands, wrung his gloves out, and went around behind the bathrooms to find out that the vending machines were not so much *vending* as *dispensing*, free basic refreshment for the hard-working doctors and nurses.

Choosing between lemonade and coffee took a minute, but he'd last had a break right after League air support had come in a couple hours back—most of his allies had been avoiding killing anyone, which was sort of like voluntarily multiplying the total number of enemies, since a lot of them eventually got up again; lucky the invasion force had been like eighty percent robots—and hadn't slept since yesterday morning. He could go longer on less, but caffeine would help. There was something innately unimpressive about a man with a bottle of Snapple lemonade, anyway.

Not that black coffee in a paper vending-machine cup was exactly intimidating. He added a pack of peanuts and a very dry cinnamon roll, and leaned back against the whirring coffee engine to fuel up.

None of the several people who came through while he ate tried to engage him in conversation; he just copied Superman and nodded at them. Three nurses came together and huddled together a little closer to the cave wall, nursing coffees. Jason had a bad moment when a chrome-colored woman in a red bustier and incredibly shiny pointed helmet drifted through and gave him a funny look, like she was trying to place him. He played it cool and ate peanuts until she got her Coke and went away. Man, the Justice League was full of freaks. He put his helmet back on when he was done, but shoved his gloves through his belt to dry. It wasn't like this was a crime scene where he needed to avoid leaving fingerprints.

A very pretty brunette nurse in a hairnet cut across his path as he crossed back toward the surgery complex, and stuck her hands out with a challenging, expectant pair of raised eyebrows. "Guns."

"What, Superhero Hospital is robbing me now?"

"You can retrieve your weapons over there at Operations," the nurse replied curtly, not putting any particular twist on *weapons* to indicate she shared the Bat prejudice against firearms, "when you leave. In the interests of our patients' safety we have a firm weapons-free policy."

Jason snorted. Most of their *patients* were potentially lethal, even stripped naked. And how could there be standard policies for a field hospital in a cave? Probably a general Justice League medical-facilities policy, come to think of it. They'd need to select for the extra-ballsy in staff recruitment for that alone. "Do you keep out visitors who *are* weapons? Oh, did some orderly take a Green Lantern's ring, because I'm really sorry if I missed that."

The nurse rolled her eyes to heaven. "Unless the gun is welded to your hand, turn it in. We are not staffed heavily enough for me to stand here arguing with you."

Jason could actually respect that. Or maybe just the nurse; she seemed cool. Wasn't like he didn't have fairly large weapons stashes to fall back on if he wound up leaving without them. He handed over three guns and the most obvious of his knives, the big SOG he kept in a thigh holster. "Label them 'Red Hood,'" he directed, and got smirked at for his troubles.

"That is *clearly* a helmet," the woman told him as she turned away toward the single large cube beside the helipad with a sign reading 'Ops.' She hadn't checked that the safeties were on, but Jason had, so it should be fine.

"Oh, sure, take my guns, make fun of my mask," he called after her. "I see how it is."

"Cry me a river, kid," she retorted, and he laughed. If she'd been closer, he might have engaged her in argument about whether he was a kid or not, because seriously, she was like thirty. Maybe ten years older than him, at the outside. No one was going to peg him for a teen hero these days, seriously.

Actually, he reflected as he came up on the surgical module and kept an eye out for anyone who might try to keep him from loitering, it was pretty interesting that just *being* here was enough for the staff to consider him trustworthy, and outweighed the costume design, the deadly weapons, and the bloodstained gloves. Well, those actually had a medical origin, but the point was it felt kind of like being inside a termite mound or an ant's nest. You'd gotten in, so therefore you were clearly supposed to be here, and there was no reason to be suspicious.

Infiltration basics, yes, but Jason honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten this much trust from strangers. On the other hand, they'd just taken his weapons, so maybe not *that* much trust.

Maybe shouldn't have given her that name; it was a matter of public record, after all, that the man known as Red Hood was a convicted murderer who'd escaped from Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, and these people had all been vetted by the *Justice League*; not exactly the picture of moral flexibility, especially for the sake of non-members. He'd just have to count on that in-nest protective camouflage.

He pulled open the door to the surgical complex with an air of confidence that would hopefully outweigh his distinctly nonmedical outfit, took two steps inside, and abruptly



recalculated. In the middle of the white vestibule stood a slight figure in a long white coat, whose corona of white hair swayed like thistledown as she turned to face him.

She had been old when he first knew her. She was older now. Not withering away, not yet, not *weak*, but moving with a certain care for aging bones that hadn't been there before. Thinly, she smiled. "*There* you are," she said.

## Chapter End Notes

Some liberties taken with the properties of secobarbitals; Virgil conked out faster than he really should've. Irey is not generally a big crier, but she's had a very stressful day.

'Final Crisis' brought Barry and Bart Allen both back from the dead, and 'Flash: Rebirth' is apparently somehow in-continuity here despite the fact that it set the plotohooks for Flashpoint and Barry has clearly not kicked spacetime in the gonads. I think that's all my Flash notes. Their continuity is an insane Mobius strip of retcon and time travel; it shouldn't be a surprise they eventually shattered reality itself.

(Speaking of which, because Jason was resurrected by laser-guided retcon, the fabric of reality doesn't know he was ever dead--on a cosmic level, after Superboy-PUNCH he *had never actually died in the first place*, even though everyone's memories are still from the reality where he did, and he still woke up in the coffin. He was not part of the rash of resurrections precipitated by Superman's rebirth and exacerbated by the damage to the gates of death; Nekron had no hold on him.)

# (Stare Out) The Steel In Your Eyes

## Chapter Notes

References starting to pile up. For those who haven't read 'A Death in the Family,' Jason's funeral was a brief rainy scene sandwiched between his death and the Ambassador Joker followup story. Four people came, and one of them (Jim Gordon) didn't know he knew the deceased. The cult thing he mentions below was the '88 miniseries *Batman: The Cult*, which was kind of his last big hurrah before he died.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jason pulled up short. "Doc Thompkins."

Only after he'd said it did he realize this was the first time they'd spoken—the first time she'd seen him, even—since before he'd died. Alfred had called her in to look at Bruce after the homeless-people-cult kidnap-brainwash thing, and not three months later Jason had been stood down as Robin, gone looking for his birth mom in the Levant and down the Horn of Africa, and never made it home.

He'd laid eyes on the doc since then, of course; she'd come back to Gotham in the crisis after Batman's death, and Jason's territory and hers had a lot of overlap.

During his publicity war with the new Bat, he'd kept an eye on her new clinic as a matter of course, although she'd taken in the escaped villain Cavalier after the Arkham fire, and he and his sword were doing a great job as her bodyguard. Leslie was a great believer in second chances. Jason had never felt any need to approach, even if she *was* on bad terms with the Bats these days and would probably have opened her door.

Probably, wanting to avoid seeing her disappointed look had had a lot to do with that. He knew perfectly well she'd never approve of his methods. She didn't even approve of Batman's.

And now she'd ambushed him in a hospital foyer. Foyer-ish. Extremely empty little room.

"Jason," she replied.

Not smiling anymore, because she honestly wasn't the smiley type, but friendly enough. She knew who he was, at least, and not by his voice, either; there'd been no sudden recognition when he spoke. She'd known already. *Someone* had told her Jason Todd was the Red Hood now...Brown knew, and she and the Doc were in regular contact. That would be it. And someone had sent her looking for Red Hood in this cave.

"You came in on the ambulance with Nightwing?" she checked. At least she didn't sound outright incredulous.

"Yeah," Jason nodded. Shrugged. "Gave the idiot first aid, so...just hanging around to see if it was a waste of a pair of gloves." Saying it that way, it felt like he was making excuses, but he wasn't going to *say* he wanted to shove it in everyone's faces that he'd actually done something for their family. Let alone say that he didn't think anyone would bother to tell him if Grayson died. He was sick to death of finding out important shit from the newspapers.

Actually, his replacement might bother. He'd broken Jason out of jail after getting him shot, invited him to hear his segment of that *stupid fucking video will*, after all.

Of course, since then Jason had dressed up as Batman and tried to murder the kid slightly; they hadn't exactly talked since, and it had been a while, but that kind of thing tended to lead to a cooling of relations, and they hadn't exactly been warm before that. (He *seriously* needed to find out what was up with the kid stealing another of his suits.)

"Someone else is working on the femoral bleed right now," said Leslie, businesslike. "I was his primary surgeon for long enough that I have experience with his specific anatomy, so they're handing the abdominal damage over to me in about fifteen minutes. Did you see what happened?"

"Nah, I was busy. Based on the scene..." Jason rocked back on his heels in consideration for a second. There'd been no sign of a defeated enemy in the immediate area of the impact crater, and no blood trail to indicate Nightwing had crawled any distance. But cutting a vital artery *just slightly* and walking away to let him bleed out indicated both more calculated cruelty and more knowledge of human anatomy than the aspiring invaders had shown, so there probably hadn't been a victorious opponent, either.

"I'd say the stomach thing happened first," Jason judged slowly. "Probably he got whacked in the gut by one of those spike-fronted gauntlets on their heavy armoured units and lifted with the spike still in him; then he took the heavy down, bailed onto a passing enemy jet-sled rather than fall with the big 'bot, fought with the alien *on* the jet-sled, screwed up because he was injured, got cut on the thigh, disabled the vehicle, and bailed off *that* shortly before it crashed. And then couldn't get up. I probably got there within three minutes." If the cut had been much deeper, all he'd have found was a corpse.

Leslie nodded again, her bright lined eyes narrow and intense with analysis. "I see. That helps, thank you." She paused, dragged her focus from the imminent surgery to the room she was in, and smiled at Jason. More warmly, "Thank you."

Jason shrugged. "Nothing to thank me for unless he pulls through."

"Ah, but no. I wouldn't have the chance to save him, if you hadn't done it first."

If he died, that would be 'wouldn't have had a chance to *fail*,' and if Doc Thompkins failed saving Nightwing after faking refusal to save the girl Robin, she'd be lucky if she was *just* driven out of Gotham again.

"That's Dickiebird, always needing his ass saved," Jason smirked. "Go fix him already."

The doctor nodded, but didn't go anywhere. "Jason," she said, in that soft, level tone she could use to be almost as scary as Alfred. She was watching exactly where his eyes were, even though she couldn't possibly see them. "I am very sorry I missed your funeral. It wasn't because I didn't want to come."

Jason laughed. It came out sort of sharp and sarcastic, but mostly he felt like he'd been sluggish. Among all the things he'd brooded about over the last several years, it hadn't actually occurred to him to *expect* her at his funeral, let alone mind her absence. All their interactions had been professional visits, after all, mostly cape-related. (He'd visited her free clinic a few times before that, as had his mom, but they'd never really talked and he didn't know whether she remembered. There were always a *lot* of scruffy slum kids in and out of that clinic.) She had a lot of dead patients. Robin was a special case, but it hadn't been Robin's funeral, it had been Jason's, and nobody had cared about Jason.

Wow, that sounded way more self-pitying than he'd meant it. "Whatever. I hear Bruce was pretty stingy with the invites, anyway."

Leslie nodded, her lips somewhat pinched. She and Bruce always had argued. "Richard was furious," she said.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Because the two of us were so close," he scoffed. Although truthfully he'd be pretty pissed if he was refused entry to Dickiebird's funeral, even now.

Was *that* what he'd meant, saying he hadn't been there for Bruce after Jason died? He'd been too angry about the funeral? That couldn't be all of it. Why had he been barred in the first place? They'd fought all the time, but Batman loved his golden bird more than anything in the world. Everyone knew that, who knew anything about Bats.

Grayson wasn't going to die. Jason had saved him. He was *not* going to have to try to hold a collapsing Bat clan together in accordance with a stupid bird's stupid last wishes.

"Go save him," Jason said. His voice came out almost without sharp edges, and he ground his teeth at it. "I don't need this shit," he added, but Doc Thompkin's eyes didn't harden.

She nodded. "I'll go scrub up," she declared, and with a nod he couldn't read, she turned away, let herself into the corridor, and strode down it. Jason stayed where he was, breathing the smell of antiseptic, and waited for her to leave that hallway before he followed her into it; no point spoiling a good exit.

He had returned to Gotham right after Doctor Thompkins had left it. He'd been totally focused on his goal, then, his master revenge scheme, but he'd still had enough emotion to spare for a complicated, stabbing feeling of betrayal and triumph when he heard that *Leslie Thompkins* had let a young woman die just to hurt Bruce, just to show him how wrong he was to keep endangering sidekicks.

Had felt some kinship for the girl-Robin, number four, dead in the line of duty. Some bitterness, that anyone thought it would matter more that she died than that he had, except that it was so obvious it mattered even less.

He'd considered the death a sort of omen, a signal that it was time to make his move, and the chaos that Brown had made of the underworld before she died, playing into Black Mask's hands, had highlighted his angle of attack. His reappearance on the playing field might have been very different in the details, without those events.

And it had all been a lie. Well, not Leslie's anger, not how she'd wanted to hurt Batman, but the breaking of her Hippocratic Oath, and Stephanie Brown's death.

He hadn't even had the spare emotion to feel particularly angry about that, by the time it came out.

Briefly and faintly there came a burst of urgent voices as Doctor Thompkins passed through one of the five doors, into somewhere medicine was happening loudly, and Jason moved forward.

As soon as he passed through the swinging doors that led into the hallway, he almost pulled up short again, though he managed to keep it to a small hitch in his step this time. West in his scarlet spandex was leaning against the wall at the far end of the corridor, beside the last doors, exactly where *he'd* been standing before his little coffee break.

Self-control wasn't really his specialty, but Jason had enough self-*respect* to stop short of kicking up a fuss that someone had stolen his spot without any way of knowing it was his. Flash had looked up and caught his eye, though, so instead of staking out his own separate patch of wall, he claimed the place directly across the corridor from the speedster. Returned the look.

"Took the kid home?"

"Yeah," Flash agreed. Almost conversational. Sighed. "She's really broken up. Like I've never seen her. Promised that she won't ever ask to go to the circus again so long as he's okay. Kids like to feel like they have control, I guess."

"Bargaining with the universe," Jason agreed. "Sometimes it even works."

"Like when?"

Jason shrugged. It was one of the stages of grief, that you were supposed to just get through, but he'd noticed that sometimes, exactly when it would cause the biggest clusterfuck, people's bargains got accepted. He didn't think the vaguely malevolent fabric of the universe would trade Dickiebird's life for Irey West's future circus visits, though.

He looked over at the grim, brooding expression on West's face.

Jason hadn't yet been drafted for Batman's war, when the teenaged West had been sidelined by power-related health problems, but during his training he'd been made aware of the Kid Flash the guy had been; bright, rapid, ridiculous, making Dickiebird look solemn by contrast. West had just been getting into his groove as the new Flash when Jason had died, and he'd really found his feet in the years afterward. Look at him now: famous legacy, upstanding

family man. Two living mentors, two living sidekicks...how did that even work? Were the Allens a duo now, and West running around with his pixy-sized brat?

"You shouldn't let her out there," Jason told him flatly.

Never mind *him* as a lesson, the baby cousin got shot in the fucking face not that long ago. And even if he was somehow an adult then, time never worked right around that kid, so it wasn't all that weird that everyone at the huge mourning ceremony and associated chest-beating had acted like he'd still been Kid Flash at the time.

Which he was again, last Jason heard. They took the statue down. (Sure, *Bart Allen* got a statue. Why the hell wasn't Jason worth that much? *Get over it*, growled the voice of his pride, because he would absolutely not put up with being jealous of the second Flash sidekick. It was a dramatic public death, anyway, not a bomb in the desert. Of course it made more of an impression. And the little fucker had *friends* to kick up a fuss.) Apparently his life was pretty much back to normal already, and his grandfather's was getting there.

He added a shark's grin, which Flash should be able to hear in his voice, if not see. "Have you just decided speedsters don't stay dead, so there's no point worrying that she might get offed?"

West's fists clenched. So did his jaw, and even through his mask he was obviously glaring. "*Your* opinions on child-rearing are definitely not welcome."

Jason made a scornful sound in his throat. "My sidekick was suicidal when I took her on and now she's *fine*." She was on track to graduate high school under her new ID, actually, and so far as he knew hadn't even killed anyone in months. "Your kid is what, eight? And I thought the *Bat* had a child-soldier problem."

"You shot Damian in the chest before he was even Robin," West replied, with truly glacial coldness. "And Red Arrow's daughter stayed home safe, but he still lost her."

Harper had passed through Gotham in the course of his breakdown, after that FUBAR. Lost his arm, lost his kid, lost his shot at revenge.... Jason had actually felt fairly sorry for him, which was not his usual reaction to drugged out pity-parties—because yeah, it *honestly wasn't his fault*, what had gone down in Star City, and he'd seen plenty of parents who cared a hell of a lot less, when they were to blame a whole lot more.

"So that's your reasoning?" he sneered. "The city might blow up, or a psycho might come by and murder her, so might as well get the most use out of her while you can?"

The Flash clocked him across the face.

Not as hard as he could, because he was too well-trained a hero to use lethal force even when he lost his temper, but the left cheek of Jason's helmet shattered impressively all the same, in a spray of crimson shards that jingled to the ground over the next few frozen seconds.

The initial punch had been at flash speeds, undodgeable, but West slowed down reflexively as soon as he made contact, and that gave Jason time to turn with the punch and deflect

almost all the force from his actual face. (West telegraphed, when he was angry. Normally he could get away with that in all but his most serious fights, because most people couldn't do anything with the knowledge even if they had it, in the time his speed allowed. Should spar with Dickiebird more, he'd lose the bad habits.)

Slowly, Jason turned back to grin at the Flash, half his mouth suddenly visible through the ruined lower half of his mask, a trickle of blood running down his lip, where the part of the blow that had landed had split the skin. "Can dish it out but you can't take it, huh?"

"Irey is not a *soldier*. She's my only daughter, and she's never had a chance at a normal life, and I am not going to try to keep her caged up when all she wants is to help people."

Jason wiped the back of his wrist across his bleeding mouth before it could drip, and showed his teeth again. "Say that again," he dared, "when some joker cuts her legs off."

"You volunteering to be that *Joker*?" the speedster spat, flicking a glance at Jason's revealed lower face. At the bright red blood smeared on his lips. "Go ahead, take off the helmet and paint yourself up, who'll even know the difference?"

Jason's vision whited out for a second.

Even before it had completely come back, he lunged for Flash's throat. The scarlet costume flickered out of existence before he got there, and he spun toward the man's new position with a heel-kick and a two-fingered eye-gouge technique bastardized from Kino Mutai that often caught people off-guard.

Neither ever landed, of course. "You sonuvabitch," Jason snarled, turning another eighty degrees to face Flash again. Didn't attack this time because two attempts was serious rage but three would just make him look like an idiot.

"What?" West retorted, nonchalant. Scornful. "I didn't say anything that everybody doesn't already *know*."

Jason had a knife in his hand and was slashing at Flash's belly before he made any conscious decision to move. He almost took the speedster by surprise, but 'almost' cuts no skin.

West reappeared behind him. "The murder, of course," he counted off on a finger. Dodged effortlessly, tallied on. "The theft, the drugs, the *crazy*." Jason tried feinting, but even if the Flash was taken in, he had time to correct his mistake before Jason could make good on it.

"The Batman obsession," he added thoughtfully, "the Robin-baiting, the Robin-*beating*, the..." He flicked his eyes up and down Jason, lingered on the damaged helmet. "Red hood."

Jason knew, on some level, even as he sliced at air, this was pointless enough to count as humiliating. He should stop. But he wanted to make Flash bleed *so goddamn much* that *not* trying was just unacceptable, no matter how unrealistic the goal.

"I thought it was on purpose," West added. He'd lost sneer and snarl in favor of a slight smirk combined with an innocent 'who-me?' head-tilt, and the fact that he was still pissed as hell

showed only in subtleties of body language, the tension in his shoulders and forearms, the way he rolled his weight onto the balls of his feet. "Like...performance art. Or like maybe you'll finally kill him when you're ready to step into the role."

*Just one hit*, Jason thought. *I just want to land one hit*. Itching to reach up under the back of his coat for his hold-out pistol. But Flash was much faster than a bullet.

Flash added, all unconcern, "You've even added the breaking out of Arkham trick, I heard."

Jason narrowed his eyes. "That's not my only trick," he growled, sheathing his knife, and reached deep into a pocket.

With his left hand, he burst a smoke capsule, and under the cover of the spreading cloud threw what he knew was a futile punch at Flash's last position.

"Really?" Flash scoffed from behind him. "I've been dealing with this move since I was *twelve*."

Jason smirked. Waited for the *whoosh* as West went into a tight circle around him, intending to blow the smoke away in a whirlwind, the usual Flash pattern when confronted with smokes and gasses. A split second later Jason felt his outstretched right arm jolt, as the hall filled with the sudden *thunk-crunch* of an accelerating speedster running headlong into a steel-faced helmet, held waiting.

"I've been fighting dirty since I was a lot younger than twelve," Jason countered, stepping out of the thinning smoke cover as he raised the snub-nosed Glock in his left hand to face the superhero, who sprawled, knocked to the ground by his own momentum.

Blood running down the Flash's face from where the sharp edge of the broken helmet had cut his cheek, eyes widening for a second as he saw the gun barrel an inch from his eye, and— Jason pulled the trigger. *Bang*.

An instant later, the gunshot still resounding, his left arm erupted in pain, and the weapon dropped from numb fingers into a waiting scarlet glove. Jason clutched his arm, helmet rolling abandoned on the floor. A nerve strike. The Flash had used a *nerve strike* on him.

"I'll take that," the speedster declared, turning the pistol over and flicking the safety on. "Oh, but you can have this back," he added, leaning forward to tuck a single spent bullet into the pocket of Jason's coat. Jason, baredheaded now, took advantage of it to glare.

"I've noticed," West declared, standing back, "that's a problem bad guys tend to have. Needing to see people *know* they're being beaten."

"Whereas you just killed me cleanly," Jason retorted, rolling his eyes.

West shook his head. "You're just proving me right, you know. What happened to you, anyway? You were kind of a little shit before, but you weren't *this*."

"You seriously have to ask that?"



West shrugged. "So you died. So did a lot of people. Superman and Superboy didn't really change. Green Arrow's personality honestly kind of improved, and he came back without his *soul*, at first. Bart's fine. And I hear Black Canary got dipped in a Lazarus Pit a while ago, and the crazy only lasted a couple of days."

"Jordan?" Jason challenged, just to see what he'd say. Most of Hal Jordan's crimes had taken place off-world, but he'd still heard the whispers through the grapevine. Slaughtered his whole Corps, apparently. Died in a grand gesture of regret and redemption. Emerged from the sun healthier than ever, after the resentment had died down. (Apparently Jason had gotten the process backwards.)

West shrugged. "He was possessed. Twice. What came back is the same guy he was before it all."

"Regular Jesus," Jason sneered.

The Flash shook his head. "I don't know your whole situation, or anything, but if nothing's been pulling your strings, then you *chose* what you've done. You chose to help Dick today, too, sure, but even if you did that purely out of the goodness of your heart, it doesn't make anything from the past disappear."

"So you're saying I don't qualify for your club."

"I'm *saying* you're an ass, and a murderer, and I am not taking your bullshit. Stay away from my kids."

"You took her to *war* today!" Jason very nearly shouted, something twisting in his chest that was not just fury. "How are you trying to protect her from *me*?"

"There is *nothing* worse than not being able to protect your kids. Than *knowing* it." Breath hissed through the Flash's teeth. "I wish she would slow down. Grow a little slower, stay at home. Stay with us. Be *safe*."

His voice was almost level, only a little rough, but the casual disdain of a minute ago had bled out of his expression, and his masked eyes bored into Jason's, deep with feeling even behind flat white lenses. "But she keeps running out ahead, and war keeps finding her. No matter what I do, how far I run with them. Any dimension, any century, it's the same. So if I make sure she can take care of herself...maybe she'll be okay."

The speedster's voice cracked there, and his hands tightened on the barrel of Jason's gun until he was sure that the knuckles under scarlet gloves were white. "That's *all* I can do. Help her prepare. I *hate* it, Todd, but she can't know that, because more than anything I am so proud of her. I will *never* let her doubt that."

The twisting in Jason's chest sharpened, and he bared his teeth in something half grin, half snarl. "When she dies," he advised, "be careful what you write on her grave."

The gun in Flash's hand jerked, like he'd been about to pistol-whip Jason and thought better of it. "I can't be here with you," he announced, tone superior, molars grinding. "We've seen

where this goes."

Looked away for a second, rubbed the drying blood off his cheek, where the cut Jason had left was already beginning to knit; sighed. "I'm going to go help with reconstruction. I'll come back after Dick's surgery to see how he is. Think you can behave like a human being until then?"

"I'm sure someone will put me down if I start eating brains."

West shook his head, almost sadly. "You've never been that kind of monster."

And in another blur of red the Flash was gone, taking Jason's gun with him.

"Go to hell," Jason told him, even though Flash had no super-hearing whatsoever.

He wasn't a monster. He wasn't even really crazy. People came out of the Lazarus Pit trying to kill everything in reach, sometimes. Screaming. Clawing. *Biting*. That wasn't him. He'd been okay. Had his mind and everything. And even if he *had* had a Pit reaction, it would have worn off by now. That had been years ago.

Sure, he'd had his moments. Gotten carried away. There'd been psychotic *periods*, okay, but he was not, fundamentally, a crazy person.

*Hey, you...did you ever realize...what you'd become?*

"Shut up," Jason muttered, and then bit his tongue. He didn't need to look any crazier.

The music that had lingered on the edge of his consciousness ever since he stopped humming did not fade; it was like his own mind mocking him. Maybe his brain just hated sudden silences. Part of him was still listening for Nightwing's breathing, afraid the silence meant it had stopped.

*Did you know all the time, but it...never bothered you anyway? Leading the blind while I stare down the steel in your eyes...*

Jason's fingernails were digging into his palms.

He was nothing like the Joker. *Nothing*.

And he wasn't *broken*. No one else was willing to do what had to be done, and if he kept going out of his way to piss off the Bat clan, why shouldn't he? Batman had no right to forget him. Ever. To push him away, to bury the uncomfortable thought, the memory of a failure. Jason wasn't going anywhere. He'd never be buried again.

Mechanically, Jason pulled his damp gloves from his belt and tugged them on, protection against himself. Licked the blood from his lips, bent to pick up his helmet, tucked it under one arm.

*My little brother*, Nightwing had called him today, after vouching for him to his friends, reaching out and trying to bind Jason back to the family with his dying wishes. After

everything. All the bad blood between them.

Last year, the night he killed Flamingo, the night they put him away, Grayson talked again about 'helping' him, and Jason didn't hear a lie. Hand to the uncaring void, he'd believed there was enough forgiveness in the perfect golden boy's perfect heart for that. For him. It wasn't *just* about control, about making Jason say he'd been wrong and fall into line. Idiot honestly wanted to *help*.

But 'help' that night meant 'Arkham Asylum,' and Jason was just as sincere when he said it was too late.

There was no helping him.

All he had was winning. Spilled blood and the fear he put across criminals' faces the only proof there was a *Jason Todd* (or at least a Red Hood), that and the sound of his name on *their* lips, when they answered one of his challenges and hunted him down, and saw him under whatever mask he was wearing.

It was always too late. Other places, other times, maybe there had been other paths, but this dunghill world was what it was; there was never any hope for him.

*There is no hope in Crime Alley.*

And none of that changed just because Dick Grayson's fantasy life apparently inhabited a sunshiny dimension where the Bats were a healthy family, and Jason belonged.

For a second he *wanted* it, felt something behind his ribs almost crack with yearning toward a vague, warm idea of a world where he'd never died, never been betrayed, never turned against them, where they trusted him as naturally as they did each other, and he was the cool, laid-back big brother the younger ones came to when Dick would be too much of a worrywart or a stick-in-the-mud, and...and it was stupid.

That wasn't him. That wasn't *them*. Drake would never have been Robin in the first place if Jason had survived, and something always went wrong in every world. If there was anything the multiverse had taught him, it was that there was no Perfect Earth. And if there ever was, it would inevitably explode.

He wasn't Prime, to go crashing around demanding impossible things of the universe like a spoiled child who didn't know better. He might be angry, might demand satisfaction for wrongs done him, but things were what they were. They wouldn't change for his wanting.

Jason coped. Jason found his own way to exist.

*Did you ever realize...what you'd become?*

He tightened his grip on his broken helmet, stirred the scattered shards with a toe, and leaned once again against the wall by the door.

He wasn't a monster.

He wasn't a quitter.

But it would have been so much easier to stay dead.

## Chapter End Notes

'Perfect Earth' having been the catchphrase of Alex Luthor, Jr., and Prime as they caused the Infinite Crisis in the attempt to make the DCU a place worth living in. Which is actually a good goal, but they had a snowballing means/ends solipsism problem and rapidly descended into evil megalomania. As you probably know.

'There is no hope in Crime Alley' was the name of the 1976 Batman story that first introduced Leslie Thompkins. She was Crisis retconned to having been around much longer, so the issue's no longer in continuity, but the phrase has stuck around.

I'm curious how people side in the Jason-vs-Wally showdown? Okay, that's it, that's all the things I wanted to say.

# It Wasn't Only Me

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You aren't supposed to be here."

It was the tough nurse with all the dark chestnut hair pinned up, the one who'd taken most of his guns. Just his luck.

There had been three patients rolled in and two out since Flash had left, and Jason had leaned against his wall and channeled all his best brooding nonchalance, wishing he'd worn a domino mask under his helmet today, and only licked his slowly swelling split lip when he had the hall to himself. No one until this nurse had seemed to want to take the time or effort to challenge his presence, as long as he kept out of the way and met no one's eyes. People were predictable like that.

He had the suspicion one of the staff who'd chickened out of dealing with him had called her in to do it, based on the way she'd zeroed in on him as soon as she came through the door. Maybe her official job was to wrangle hospital loafers? Although if it was, she probably wouldn't have been in such a hurry earlier. Secret hospitals got a way lower number of visitors.

Anyway, if they had called her it'd been something like 'deal with big scowling guy in surgery corridor.' She'd locked onto him, recognized the helmet tucked under his arm, then looked up at his face. Seemed somehow surprised. She must have imagined him different. Maybe it was the hair? It wasn't like she knew his dye-spotted past, to expect a fellow brunet. Red-heads did have a totally undeserved stereotype for friendliness, along with temper. Or maybe she just hadn't been expecting to ever see his actual face; Red Hood did kind of give a strong first impression of valuing his anonymity, and superheroes as a whole were pretty strict about it.

*Or* it could be the been-punched-in-the-face-by-a-super visual effect; that startled people sometimes.

"Listen," Jason began, in the opening she left being taken aback either by red hair or punched faces.

"Nurse Rourdan," she prompted, although he hadn't been asking.

"Nurse Rourdan," he agreed, "I'm kind of responsible for a guy they're working on in there, and I'm sure the docs are doing fine, but I kind of want to—stand guard. Or something," he added, a little lamely. She was really *imposingly* unimpressed. Damn Flash anyway for breaking his mask.

"Uh-huh," she said. "And I'm sure you make a really effective guard when I took all your weapons. I *did* take all your weapons, right?"

She completely failed to *get* the lifestyle, if she thought he would have actually handed everything over, but he still had to suppress a slight impulse to squirm about the gun he'd fired, because she totally knew. That look said it all. Guns were not quiet, even with soundproofed walls. Hopefully, he hadn't startled any surgeons with scalpels in people's hearts or anything.

"Batman handled all the security for this location," she continued, before he got around to answering that question. "You don't think you know more about security than Batman, do you?"

That was probably a normally effective line, but she'd pulled it on the wrong person. Jason snorted. "Lady, I could talk for *hours* about the flaws in Batman's security protocols."

That threw her, but not enough, and calling her 'lady' had lost him some toleration points. "Waiting room," she said firmly. "Now."

There wasn't really any way to insist without making another scene, and he *definitely* couldn't *fight* her, and any of that would probably get him kicked out by whatever security staff they kept around. And wouldn't West just love *that*. Proving him right, his ass.

He raised his hands to shoulder level in surrender. "Okay, okay." He tried topping it off with a roguish grin; he was no Dick Grayson, but he was an amiable guy on the whole, and good-looking enough to have been Grayson's understudy; even with the fat lip he could manage 'disarming,' if not actual charm.

It didn't melt the nurse, or anything, but she didn't seem any angrier with him. Good enough. For the moment, Jason allowed himself to be beaten, as the only road to victory. He definitely preferred situations that could be successfully resolved by stabbing something.

Rourdan marched him up a translucent tunnel to a separate segment of the base, which he was not happy about, and waved him through the second door they came to. "Recovery is in this module," she told him. "This isn't a long-term facility, but we'll be operational for the next few days at least, and by the time you can visit your friend, he'll have been moved to a bed here."

"He's not my friend." Never his friend. "My brother," he amended, because Rourdan was giving him a funny look, and that *was* his supposed justification for hanging around.

Her expression softened a little. "I'm sorry there aren't any magazines or anything," she told him, and waved him through the door.

With an irritated sigh, Jason nodded to her like the superhero he wasn't, and went in.

The waiting room was unoccupied, small, and sterile; white as the rest of the place and very visibly recently assembled, and its rectangle of floor was filled with the kind of off-white folding chairs that had plastic cushions built in, but no arms. The seats ran all around the walls, with a second row stretching across the middle of the room, their backs to the entrance. There was no decoration whatsoever. If Bruce had drawn up the floorplan for this room, it

was with subtle antagonism toward the jumpy, worried superheroes and superhero support personnel that were going to be occupying it.

He saw faint signs people had been and gone; seats knocked slightly out of line, a scuffed suggestion of a muddy footprint. It would fill up, as combat and cleanup drew to a close, and people had time to find out where the wounded were hidden and come check on them. He'd probably have company pretty soon, unless you needed a really high security clearance to get in here any way other than in a medical airlift.

There were thirty-seven seats in all, and Jason very deliberately chose one in the far corner, that gave him a perfect line of sight to the door but kept him out of sight until someone actually stepped across the threshold.

A better position if he still had any guns, but he didn't *really* expect to have to fight any more today, he was just placating the prickle of paranoia. After all, apart from that one raid on Titan Tower, and that one time he briefly kidnapped the new Speedy, he hadn't made a habit of antagonizing anyone in the hero community besides the Bats. And while West clearly took his bat-feud kind of personally on Grayson's behalf, he was pretty sure most of the League affiliates that had mobilized today wouldn't know the Red Hood from Adam, broken helmet occupying the chair next to his or not. While he liked recognition in a general sense, that was just fine with him.

He figured on waiting about fifteen minutes before staging a jailbreak. Warden Rourdan would be up to her elbows in *something* by then. Leaving altogether would be retreat, at this point, and he *still* wanted to be the first to know if Nightwing died on the table. If only so he could head for Alaska before the explosion.

Or get in position to take advantage of the opening, and raise merry hell in Gotham again while the Bats were off-balance. He hadn't decided yet.

Before his fifteen minutes were up, the door swung open on some of the last people he wanted to see.

Robin and Red Robin both stopped short, same way he had when unexpectedly confronted with Dr. Leslie. Al Ghul Junior broke into a sneer almost at once, but Replacement #1 betrayed no particular reaction even as they both began moving again, and he smoothly folded his way around the brat, who kicked him in the ankle in a desultory way as they both looped left around the central row of chairs, as far from Jason as possible. He took advantage of their momentary distraction with one another to assess them.

Tired, tense; not exhausted or freaking out. Oil stains on both their costumes from killing alien robots; they'd come straight from the field. No one had taken Red Robin's collapsed staff, and he was sure they were both still carrying whatever were their current variations on the old batarang design. Something to be said for low-profile weaponry.

And, admittedly, for not drawing on supersonic persons while packing subsonic ammunition. He felt slightly naked.

"Jason," Replacement greeted flatly, looking up the aisle at him. His eyes were hidden behind the red cowl, but his mouth was a grim slash in his face. Regular mini-Bat he was growing up to be.

"You don't seem surprised," Jason observed, not bothering to even straighten in his chair. It was '*Jason Todd*' when they were spoiling for a fight and 'Red Hood' when they were keeping a strict distance. From Bats, his bare first name was a sign of truce.

"Doctor Thompkins said that you brought Nightwing in," Red Robin responded. He came forward to claim a folding chair five places away from Jason, almost directly opposite the entryway, maneuvering the little demon into the seat on the far side of him.

Jason *knew* Robin and Red Robin hated each other, so the protective body language really said something.

He'd be indignant, except as Flash had recently pointed out, he'd shot the smaller of these kids in the chest last year. Not long before he stabbed the other one, even.

The shooting had been mainly intended as a distraction, to keep the knot of heroes busy while he withdrew, although also as a statement and provocation. (*He's mine*, Grayson had told the others, when they'd wanted to pursue while he took care of the little one. Mission accomplished.) If the actual goal had been the kid's death, he would have been a lot more precise or thorough, and made sure of it. But they could both *easily* have died from those wounds, and he wouldn't have minded at all. He'd thought Drake *had*, until he turned out later to be alive after all.

It was kind of interesting to wonder what Dickiebird would have done, if they'd been killed. With Bruce and Tim and Damian gone, and Jason completely past forgiving. There was no way the girls or his assorted friends or even Alfred would have been able to hold him together, but exactly how would he have broken? At the time, Jason had really wanted to find out. Had maybe wanted to see Dick Grayson, wearing the cowl, coming after him with murder in his eyes.

*My little brother*, the stupid bird had still said today, after everything. Bloodied and bleary and still pushing himself, still coming back around to his fantasies about family.

*I told you a year ago it was always too late for me. You've hated me enough times, I've done enough to carve myself out that place—what the hell is wrong with you? Do I have to kill one of them for real?*

"She said you kept him alive."

Jason darted a look at Red Robin, but his face was as expressionless as his voice. Damian made up for that by scowling. It reminded him of little Impulse's look when he got her name wrong—what, three hours ago? Not even. It seemed like days. The current Robin wasn't all that much bigger than the current Impulse, though he had to weigh twice as much in muscle. Was the brat taking steroids or something? Hell, he was Talia's, she probably raised him on steroids laced with Lazarus extract.



"Kept some blood in him," he allowed. Frowned. "They're out of surgery already?" It had been *maybe* fifty minutes all told. If he'd been guarding the wrong operating room, or been shuffled away right before it wrapped up, he was going to be pissed.

The littlest bird went pinched, and Red Robin shook his head slightly. "The information was passed on by a proxy when we arrived."

"This Thompkins woman is avoiding Drake," drawled demon Robin ever-so-helpfully, some of his tension draining with the opportunity to get a dig in at his adopted brother.

Jason raised an eyebrow. Damian Wayne had never met Leslie Thompkins. That was how badly her status as a family friend had suffered. Wow. Who was treating all the serious injuries these days? Who'd helped little-monster survive that bullet to the chest, and all the rest of it? Bruce clearly hadn't found another physician willing to abet his little conspiracy, or Leslie wouldn't be rummaging around in Grayson's gut right now.

Alfred was a good man with a needle, but he was no doctor. It irritated Jason, not to know.

"Not surprised," was all he said. Leslie had several reasons to avoid the third Robin, most of them Stephanie Brown.

Drake scowled, briefly, but forced the expression away, even as the little demon at his side remarked with satisfaction, "Yes, it seems to be a popular hobby. Soon enough, I expect, no one will willingly come within ten yards."

Clearly, there was some drama going on in Replacement's life which Jason had missed due to a whole huge helping of not giving a crap.

"Robin," the kid in the cowl said flatly. So far as Jason could tell he was staring down the plastic wall. Maybe he was pretending he was Kryptonian and could watch the hall on the other side that way. He was taking fairly deep breaths. "Please save the personal remarks for when we're out of uniform."

"But then I'd have to spend my personal time around you," retorted Robin, spiteful and with perfect timing. Jason had a hard time not starting up a slow clap. They could take this show on the road, if they could find a big enough market for comedic blood sports.

Jason raised an eyebrow at Drake, who hadn't responded to that last dig, though it had looked like he'd had trouble stifling some (presumably vicious) remark. Maybe the highbrow version of a 'your mom' joke, or something; so far as Jason knew, the demon brat's main weak points were his mommy and daddy issues, and Red Robin shared too many of the latter to try to use them against Robin. He might have kept his cool, but the effect was a little ruined by the fact that he was displaying the effort. That was a fairly distinctive meditative breathing pattern.

Jason had always been crap at meditation. Oh, he'd sat through the sessions, given a reason to, gone through the motions, but he'd never gotten anything out of it even when he did everything right. He was even self-aware enough to know that this was because he'd never especially cared to try.

If you released rage and attachment and desire, what exactly was even left? Where were *you*? What was the point of anything? Replacement was probably a meditation star.

Jason had been seventeen before Talia had produced the combat instructor who had found a moving meditation that actually worked for him. It was still based on kata, at least to begin with, but rather than seeking distance or peace, you found the heart of your anger and lived there. Burning, she said. Shan He had called rage a fire that consumed itself. (Once he started practicing it, Jason became sure Batman used something like it pretty often. Hypocrite had never tried to share.) It wasn't peaceful, but it was still meditation.

It had been from deep within that angry meditation that he had shot Shan He between the eyes, on the evening she headed home to murder her husband and children.

The man had betrayed her, sure, but the kids didn't deserve to suffer for what their father had done. Let alone *die*.

He'd actually been hoping she'd be the first teacher he didn't have to kill.

Should have known better than to get attached.

"If redbird here really wants to talk to someone, I'm pretty sure he has the skills to force the issue," Jason opined, lounging all the more comfortably in his corner. His knee bumped the helmet on the chair next to him and it slid backward toward the wall. Whatever.

Both bat-birds looked narrow-eyed at him, trying to figure out his angle. Good luck, boys.

"Yes, Drake, you should consider ambushing your old friends in their sleep as a social tactic," Damian recommended after a few seconds, and Red Robin snorted but didn't seem as tense as before, though that could have been the meditation.

"I've heard worse ideas," said Jason, thinking vaguely of his own detour to make sure Raven stayed asleep, when he broke into Titan Tower to beat up his replacement, just so he wouldn't have to fight her, and not primarily because she was so powerful. He hadn't really known the mystic well enough to call them *friends*, but she'd always been nice to him and never confused him with Dick, or conversely seemed to blame him for *not* being the real Robin.

"You have *had* worse ideas," Robin deadpanned, and Jason smirked.

"Could be, little bird."

Red Robin rolled his eyes, which he managed to broadcast through body language even though his upper face was hidden, and things felt almost comfortable.

Not one to let anyone else be the one to ruin the moment, Jason shifted in his seat, looked around at the otherwise empty waiting room. "Bat ever going to show?"

"Father will put in an appearance when it suits him," said little Robin in his usual cold, snotty tones.

There was something a bit different this time, though. Jason arched an eyebrow. That had sounded suspiciously like disapproval. Slowly, he grinned. Oh, yeah. Dickiebird was the kid's Batman, all right, even if he'd taken off the cape months ago. The current dynamic duo clearly had holes you could drive a truck through. Had the kid killed anyone on the old man's watch yet? "Getting fed up?" he inquired lazily.

"It is correct to prioritize efficiently," was Damian's non-answer.

Replacement, silent in his folding chair of demilitarization, sat fairly humming with repressed feelings. His forearms were bulging visibly with muscle tension. Since these days the kid was capable of an almost disturbingly blank façade, that was probably his equivalent of a screaming tantrum.

*Hah*, Jason thought. They're all sick of his bullshit. You've lost one of your birds to another, now, and do any of them honestly trust you at all anymore? No, they don't. You've taught them better than that.

Briefly he entertained a little fantasy of the extended Bats getting together and expelling Batman from the family. A sort of popular uprising in his little kingdom. '*Le roy est mort.*'

Except *that* had already happened, and gone *so* well.

"He'll come," said Drake flatly. Not looking at Jason or at the little demon.

"Oh, for his golden boy? Probably," Jason agreed. As expected, his easy, scornful answer got their hackles up. "If what he's doing is so important, though, why are you here and not there?"

"Tt. Father is negotiating the surrender of a detachment of the enemy that have occupied a fortified position."

Jason slouched a little more artistically. "So basically you were in the way?"

"It might still come to a fight again," interjected Red Robin. He was still keeping his eyes on the far wall; probably calculating the force it could resist in joules or something. Too bad for him this wasn't a normal waiting room; no ugly art to gaze at intently. "Batman wanted Robin out of the line of fire."

The little monster rounded on his keeper at that, the uneasy peace between them finally broken. "I am perfectly competent—"

"Whoah, whoah," interrupted Jason, raising both hands. He hardly realized he'd stood up until both redbirds turned sharply to look at him, thoroughly distracted from one another, hands hovering over weapons.

As casually as he could manage, he took another couple of steps forward and flopped back into a new chair, now with only one seat of buffer between himself and Replacement, that and the empty aisle. It meant he had the door at his back, but he had a much better angle for visual on them now, and it was harder for Replacement to not look at him. Hopefully he was

still far enough from Robin, and had Red Robin enough in between them, that Replacement wouldn't panic at the advance of the Red Hood toward his charge.

When had it started to make such perfect sense that he was someone you protected Robin from?

(Robin-baiting, Robin-*beating*. The sound of mad laughter. *No*.)

Well, at least they weren't fighting now.

After a few more seconds of Jason also not attacking anyone, the tension eased somewhat.

"Tt. Why are you here, anyway?" baby Wayne grumbled, crossing his arms.

"I can't be worried about my big brother?" Jason replied, sardonic bite turned up to eleven.

"You are *not* part of my family, Todd," Damian snapped, and Jason wasn't exactly prepared to argue that, because a) he had his pride and b) he'd shot the kid in the chest. Not to belabor the point or anything. He couldn't make a rational argument, but damn did it raise his hackles, listening to the spoiled little prince declaiming about who was and was not part of 'his' family.

*I was there first!* a small voice somewhere in his mind was insisting. *I earned it! More than you ever did!* But he was above that. He was past that.

They'd locked him up in Arkham. Grayson and little baby al-Ghul-Wayne. He'd fought them, and fought them, and eventually lost, and they'd locked him up in a cell right down the hall from the Joker's. He wasn't actually inclined to forgive that, and yet...

He shrugged, arms folded across his chest. "Whatever. Take it up with Big Bird. I have a conversation to finish when he wakes up."

Meanwhile 'Big Bird' had gotten an almost-invisible flicker of smile out of Drake. Hah. Brainboy had probably watched Sesame Street every day while still in diapers. Also probably been potty-trained hella young, anal-retentive twerp.

"Why *did* you pick up that suit, anyway?" Jason asked. It was probably the most courteous question he'd ever posed his replacement. "It was mine."

Red Robin shrugged. No apology. "You weren't using it."

"Tt," interjected the little demon. "If you expect honest explanations from *him*—"

Jason waved a dismissive hand. "Shush, Replacement's Replacement. The grownups are talking."

Baby Wayne growled, but Red Robin stifled a grin. Wow, they had the rivalry thing *bad*. "It was because it was yours," Drake admitted as the almost-expression faded, with a candor Jason didn't remember seeing in him since that time he'd exclaimed that *no one could ever forget you*. "I wasn't in any state of mind to create something brand new for myself at the

time," he shrugged. "And I wasn't sure how far under I was going to have to go, looking for Bruce. Dick would have let me use Nightwing, but..." He shook his head.

Dick hadn't even worn Nightwing during his *own* infiltration missions, or whatever that clusterfuck with Wilson had been. Immediately dragging the suit into the League of Assassins would have been kind of bad stewardship. That, and he'd probably been pretty angry at Grayson at the time, not inclined to ask favors. Being replaced sucked ass.

Plus, taking on Red Robin let him lodge a protest about being kicked out of the job, by hanging onto the 'Robin' name as part of his new one. He really was a sneaky kid.

The sneaky kid shrugged. "Plus blue's not my color."

Jason cracked his neck and allowed himself a cocky smirk. "So you ripped me off again."

Narrow smile from under the red cowl. "They say not to mess with a winning formula."

## Chapter End Notes

Note that because of the approximate year elapsed since Flashpoint would have happened, Damian is nearly twelve. I try not to pin down any more Robin ages than I can help, since the writers stopped letting Dick age once he passed twenty-one. Which led to Tim's origin story setting it up so either he watched Dick's parents die at negative years old, or he's the same age as Jason, who consequently died almost as soon as he became Robin, and neither of those really works. But Damian is pinned at 'almost twelve.'

I named Shan He (單荷) and expanded her a little, but she's from Red Hood: Lost Days, where she appeared in one background panel and stuck out a little in the list of Jason's dead teachers, who were mostly professional scumbags rather than the personal kind. Rourdan is not someone you should recognize from anywhere. I believe Tim said Red Robin was 'already soiled' when he took it up, so this is the diplomatic version of that.

# You Were Running From

## Chapter Notes

Okay, so...chapter three was moderately popular and chapter four was nearly ignored. I clearly don't understand this site? Oh well. Update is updated.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"So you ripped me off," Jason smirked, cracking his neck.

A narrow smile from under Red Robin's cowl. "They say not to mess with a winning formula."

Jason might have lost his temper at that, if he'd been caught at a bad time, but the kid was acknowledging what he'd done, and a good joke could take you a long way. "You changed the design, though," he said instead.

"Alfred did, after I got back. Wanted a softer image for me."

Talia's son let out the irritated scoffing sigh of pre-pubescent everywhere dealing with annoying adults. "It wasn't as if my Grandfather didn't already know your name," he pointed out. "You had no need to adopt any alternate identity at all."

"Oddly enough," Drake retorted, "Ra's actually doesn't tell his entire League everything he knows."

Aaaand they were fighting again. Jason wondered what, if anything, Golden Bird did about it. Probably did his best to keep them apart. And yet Drake still tried to protect Baby Demon, apparently without giving it conscious thought. Grayson probably had a point, saying the kid took care of everyone but himself.

"You know where I got Red Robin?" Jason heard himself ask.

It wasn't an entirely idle question. Donna *could* have filled him in. She'd been present enough to know at least what world had originated the costume, and probably put a lot of the circumstances together. The question *had* gotten both birds' attention off each other.

"No," Drake replied guardedly. He'd seen Red Robin on the copycat and heard that the identity belonged to Jason back when he was getting Jason shot and arrested; presumably he'd copied it from that and not inquired any further. Jason settled back in his new chair, which creaked slightly, turned his hands palm-up on his knees, and talked.

"When we were out wandering up and down the multiverse," he said, "before Darkseid made his move, Troia and Rayner and I hit a world where most of the capes had retired. Nice,

peaceful place. Turned out that after that version of me died, that place's Bat caught up to the Joker right away and put him down."

Jason felt his own heartbeat in his chest and his fingertips, heard it loud in his ears. "And then he didn't stop. Eight years on, he'd killed pretty much every major threat in the world."

Neither of the replacements seemed to be breathing. Jason flicked imaginary lint off the front of his body armor. "We got off to a rocky start, but after I convinced him who I was and how, he took the gun out of my face and it was a regular old family reunion."

"Turned out he'd been figuring his Robin was going to be needing a more adult image soon, back right before that version died, and after, he kept it around." He'd left the Cave and the manor. There'd been no sign of Alfred. No Robin suit in a glass case. But he'd held onto that. That one thing. Jason's 'future.' When his Jason would never have a future again.

*You used to crack jokes at times like this.* And sure, he wasn't the same person, not really. That world's Jason had still been cold in the ground, long since eaten by worms, no second chance. But he *was* Jason Todd, and there, in that place, Batman remembered. Batman missed what he'd been.

*Sorry, Batman. Now I just crack heads!*

And the grim old man had almost grinned, as he fought. *Now **that's** funny!*

Jason shrugged, all unconcern. "That universe was getting invaded, so he gave me the suit and we went out to deal with that. Then Ultraman punched out his lungs. I left right before Prime blew up the planet."

And that was all there was to it, really. The waiting room was very silent. He stared at his hands for a second, before flicking a sharp look up at the two birds. He showed them his teeth. "And then in this one *other* world, I ran into a me who was Batman."

And who kicked his ass, but he wasn't going to say *that*. There was no good reason for that Jason to be so much stronger than he was. Logically, *he* should be better trained, since he'd had all those years after his death that he'd spent focused on nothing but training, gone through so many teachers. He'd worked *hard*, but apparently there was nothing like on-the-job experience. It was irritating as hell.

"*You* as Batman? With all the guns?" inquired Robin, snide.

Jason narrowed his eyes at him. Little punk. "No. Just Batman." Donna had been Wonder Woman, too. He'd received the impression that most of the older generation of the League had been killed off there, and successors had stepped into their shoes. Whether that world's Grayson was dead or merely disinclined to don the cowl he didn't know.

"Well, that explains a bit," said Red Robin quietly, drawing him back to this world and this waiting room.

Jason thought of the night the two of them had met in *his* Batcave, both wearing their own versions of the cape, trying to paper over the hole in the world. His attempt had been better than Drake's, he still felt. He'd kept the fear of the Bat in Gotham as their network floundered. He made a *good* Batman.

But he'd lost the fight for it to Grayson, and didn't even mind. Anymore.

He snorted. "Sure it does, Replacement."

He wasn't sure why he'd shared any of that. He wasn't the sharing type, really, and he didn't especially want to be understood.

Except maybe he knew exactly why, because he'd learned long ago that you never kept people's attention so totally as when you were pulling another snarling, blood-soaked rabbit out of your hat. He loved the look of shock on people's faces. And these Robins were long past being shocked by anything Jason could do. If he killed one of them right here, the other would skip straight past shock.

Red Robin had already smoothed his face in calculation, but Robin was looking faintly numb. As he watched, though, the boy scrubbed a hand over his own face as though scraping the consternation away, and an eerily similar calculating expression flowed across it. He looked Jason in the eye again. "You really are pathetically anxious for Father's attention, aren't you, Todd?"

Jason snorted. Transparent goading. Not going to be sucked in. "If I have my way, I'll be out of here before the Bat finds time in his schedule for hospital visits."

"Why haunt this place at all?"

Jason shrugged. "Grayson dies, I have some last requests to discharge. Might as well stick around."

Damian, who had already been looking washed-out in spite of the complexion he'd gotten from his mother, went so pale he seemed grey, and set his jaw in an expression of rage that might have resembled his father's if he hadn't been eleven years old, but as it was looked sort of like he was pouting. "Grayson is going to be *fine*," he ground out. "He is not nearly weak enough to die to something like this."

Dick was *so* the bratling's Batman. Jason smirked slightly and gave a rolling shrug. "Don't know what to tell you, kid; humans sometimes die when they get a femoral bleed on top of major internal bleeding and a ruptured organ or two."

Baby Wayne growled, digging his green gauntlets into the cheap plastic cushion of his chair as though he wished it was an enemy's throat, which was probably true. (His feet didn't reach the floor.) "Why are we here when we can't possibly *do* anything?"

"Because you were too worried about Nightwing for your own safety," Drake answered flatly. "And having two of us down at once is unacceptable, which was the best-case scenario if you remained in combat."



"Wow, Replacement," Jason deadpanned. "You're all heart."

"I do not require coddling," the little bat-bird spat at both of them.

"Maybe you don't," Jason allowed, when Red Robin refused to dignify that with a response, or whatever his broody silence meant. "But they need to protect you sometimes, to feel better about themselves. After all, *good* people don't make ten-year-olds into soldiers."

Drake honest-to-god *flinched*. It wasn't like he was even responsible—maybe he didn't like hearing his mentors' weak points targeted. Robin gritted his teeth, dropped to the floor so he could stand upright. Drake tensed, ready to jump into the middle of any violence. "I was already a soldier when I came to them, Todd," Damian bit out. "They could only deny me the field so long."

Talia wouldn't have raised a soldier. Not really. She'd raised a prince and a weapon as one messed-up kid, and he didn't take orders any better than Jason ever had, so far as he could tell. He'd survived over a year in the tights, although it had been a close thing more than once.

Of course, even before he'd been Robin, Jason had shot him in the chest.

"Your funeral," was all he said.

Robin's lips pulled back from his teeth, and he was clearly about to say something scathing, maybe hoping to get Jason to attack him, when the door opened. Both birds' attention snapped to it, and Jason was put in the awkward position of trying to look at the door that was almost directly behind him, without leaving himself too open to little al-Ghul and his sharp fangs, and without looking defensive. Mostly he just turned to look at the door and kept a lot of his attention alert to anything approaching from behind.

The newcomer was Chrome Woman, from the coffee machines, wearing a somewhat mutinous expression between her low-cut top and brass helmet; she was followed by a big, uncomfortable-looking man in Captain Marvel's costume. He had long dark hair and wasn't Captain Marvel. Word had it the new guy under the lightning bolt was called 'Shazam,' and Jason was pretty sure he was Captain Marvel's old sidekick, Captain Marvel Junior, the kid who'd always had that hilarious weakness of not being able to say his own hero name without powering down. (Or up, presumably.)

Which was a good clue it was the same guy, right there, because 'Shazam' had the *exact* same problem. Was that some kind of curse, or was the guy who handed out magic lightning powers screwing with him, or was he some kind of masochist? That, Jason did not have the data or the curiosity to answer.

They'd never actually met, and Jason kind of hoped the other guy had no more idea who he was than *he* had about Chrome Woman.

Who'd peeled a sharp right with a vague nod of acknowledgement in their direction as soon as she passed through the door, and took a seat along that wall, near the front corner. Apparently much less sociable than his predecessor, Captain Marvel The Second took a seat

along the left wall without even an exchange of nods. Jason and the birdies were now a little bit surrounded, but since Chrome Woman was pulling out an MP3 player and Shazam Boy in his crimson, white, and gold was sitting and staring at his own twiddling thumbs, managing to look amazingly small for such a huge guy, it wasn't *so* bad.

He gave Nurse Rourdan a sardonic look, unsurprised to see her in the doorway, and she raised her eyebrows at him. He did the disarming grin again; she snorted, the door closed. Jason sensed something moving sharply behind him, and turned back, guard raised, to discover it had been Robin, taking a threatening step forward. Still empty-handed and not in a combat stance, but he had one fist ready.

"It is not 'my funeral,'" the sidekick told him hotly, apparently unconcerned with their new audience. "Just because *you* failed does not mean anyone else will. Even *him*." He jerked his head scornfully toward Red Robin, who didn't even react like he'd been insulted. Either he was doing his Zen thing again, or he was so used to the way Demon Wayne talked he'd registered that as a compliment.

"*I failed*, huh?" Jason retorted. Stomach churning. If he hit Robin, he was the bad guy again. *And* he was letting an eleven-year-old control him. *And* he was surrounded by superheroes right now. He let the kid try to loom, and stayed right where he was. He wasn't making the first move. Not this time. "*That's* what you got? The cautionary story of me fucking up?"

"You disobeyed, and paid dearly for it."

If Batman had been present, Jason would cheerfully have strangled him. This was often the case, but not often (recently) as *absolutely* true as right now. His breath hissed through his teeth.

"*I tried to save my mom*. Yes, he'd told me not to because it was dangerous, but then he left me alone outside a building where my mom was alone with the Joker." He looked from one Robin to the other, eyes narrow. If one of them went for him, he was making it a priority to hit them both over the head with folding chairs. "What would *you* have done? Built a sand castle?"

"I'd probably have done something similar," Drake volunteered blandly, and then paused for a few seconds, as if weighing the scenario. His mother had been kidnapped and killed not that long after he'd become Robin; he'd stayed at home and let Bruce fail to save her. If Jason hadn't *known* that, he'd never have suspected it, to look at him. What had he said, when the Bat came home with a coma patient and a corpse?

Maybe Replacement *wouldn't* have walked up to his newly discovered mother and said 'Mom, I'm really Robin, let me help.' He was a sneaky, paranoid kid; maybe he'd have snuck around in the rafters and learned enough to see the ambush coming and get away. That was why Bruce had taken him on, after all. Better soldier.

Robin snorted, breaking the mood. "*My* mother could handle the Joker."

Jason snickered, involuntarily. He was beginning to suspect this kid was an unintentional laugh riot. "Could be," he admitted. It would depend on a lot of factors, really, who won that

confrontation, but leaving Talia al Ghul alone with the Joker definitely wasn't the same 'helpless victim' proposition most moms would be. Or dads, for that matter. He settled himself in his chair, legs splayed lazily, and threw in a laid-back sort of smirk. "She's also almost as much of a bitch as mine turned out to be."

He raised his eyebrows when the kid looked like he was going to lash out at that. "Hey, kid, I've known your mom almost as long as you have. I owe her. She's tough, and crazy, and selfish as hell. You really going to argue with any of that?"

Talia still had a bounty on her son's head, he knew. Damian had done to her what she had never been brave enough, or cold enough, to do to Ra's, and chosen to side with Batman. She wasn't going to be able to forgive that. Baby Wayne grumbled in his throat.

Mentally, Jason patted himself on the back. He was playing nice today, for real. Not-nice Jason wouldn't have been able to resist the 'your mom in bed' angle once he started arguing with Robin about Talia.

Jason wasn't the type to kiss and tell, especially when he knew the cougar (who was, incidentally, *great* in bed) had slept with him partly because he was connected to Bruce and she was obsessed, and partly in hopes of making him more controllable. He was okay with being used, when the people doing it were relatively up-front about it and he got something in exchange, but Talia...well, he might have slightly complicated feelings about Damian's mom that he *probably* shouldn't air all over a waiting room for the sake of a childish argument.

"Watch what you say about my mother," the boy growled, somewhat ironically.

"Oh I am, little prince. Believe me."

Chrome Woman was still ignoring them pretty effectively, but Shazam seemed to be having an excruciatingly awkward time pretending not to be listening in. He was especially watching Jason, but he didn't seem so much suspicious as *confused*. After all, the broken helmet was over in the corner, and without it Red Hood's gear looked pretty much like civvies, unless you knew to look for the lines of body armor underneath.

At that moment the door once again swung open, not on any new fretting hero, but on the indefatigable Nurse Rourdan, who Jason felt he could conclusively say was assigned to the role of Chief Non-patient Liaison or something. Everyone immediately focused on her, Marvel Mk. 2 especially looking pitifully hopeful for news. "Party for Nightwing?" she asked.

"He wishes," joked Jason, as he and Red Robin joined the baby bird on their feet. Not that Dickiebird was likely to be up to a party anytime today.

Rourdan's eyes flicked from Jason to the birds, apparently surprised they were connected, and said, "Nightwing has been moved to this module and is available for limited visitation." She found her smile again. "Please come with me."

Red Robin nodded, and they all looped around the middle chairs the short way, past ex-Marvel Junior. The Robins followed Rourdan out the door, but Jason hung back for a minute.

"Oh, hey, Shazam?" he said to the big man in the white cape, who gave him his attention. "Wanted to say, sorry about killing your archenemy awhile back."

Shazam did a gratifying jaw-drop, and Jason was gone before the magic hero got past shock to whatever his final reaction was going to be. One thing you learned pretty fast around Batman was how to have the last word.

He fell in beside Red Robin, who shot him a look. "Really?" he said, voice flat with *unimpressed*.

Jason shrugged. "He had a *serious* grudge against that Nazi. People get possessive sometimes. Wouldn't blame him if he was pissed."

"And you apologized out of sincere remorse."

"More to see him make that face," Jason admitted easily. Red Hood had semi-publicly killed Captain Nazi a few years ago, during his initial takeover of Gotham's crime world, when Black Mask had brought the cyborg in as an assassin. Nobody *ignored* their nemesis getting offed, so Shazam was one of the few non-Bat-affiliated supers out there who was pretty much guaranteed to know who Red Hood was, if not know him on sight.

The Marvels weren't quite *Batman* about not killing, but *Captain* Marvel at least had been even more of a Boy Scout than Superman. Ditching his helmet before Junior came in had probably saved him a super-awkward conversation about morals, though he wasn't about to thank West for it.

"Can never resist a chance to needle people, can you?"

Jason shrugged.

"You realize," Timmy added dryly, "most people don't know your history. I wonder what the rumor mill is going to conclude about Bats socializing with one of their own villains."

"I'm not a villain," Jason grouched. Smirked. "Anyway, given Batman's history, I guess I'm going to get Catwoman jokes."

Red Robin made an irritated noise, as well he might. "Is that why you left your helmet behind?"

Shazam had probably noticed it by now, staring across the waiting room at him, confirming the Red Hood ID. "Nah, I just don't like to haul useless stuff around with me."

"Litterbug," said Red Robin, deadpan.

"And actually," Jason continued, "if Chrome Tits or Marvel Junior is a gossip, there's going to be at *least* as much speculation about the identity of Robin's scheming badass mom."

"Bulleter." "

Jason blinked, trying to connect that up to 'litterbug,' then trying to make it even *work* as an insult, even from a Bat. "What?"

"Her name is Bulleter." Not 'Chrome Tits,' he didn't have to add. His tone did it for him.

Repressed little prude, Jason thought, without particular rancor.

"If she doesn't want people to look at them, she shouldn't leave 'em hanging out."

"Could you *be* any more crude, Todd?" Robin snapped over his shoulder. Nurse Rourdan was doing 'professionally expressionless' surprisingly well for such an expressive woman.

"Yes," Jason assured the kid, "I *really* could."

And then Rourdan stopped beside room number 27, and there was no more distracting themselves.

"So long as you keep your voices down, I'll let all three of you in at once," said the drill sergeant of a nurse severely, apparently realizing that her powers of command were not enough to contain the explosion that might follow if she required them to decide an order of precedence. (Actually Jason and Drake would both have let the little bird in first, no contest, unless he failed to realize this and made a complete jerk of himself trying to wrest the position, but that was far from out of the question, so.) "Ten minutes *only*."

Inside the room, which he had to himself, Grayson was just short of being on actual life support, or maybe not even short because he was hooked up to a dialysis machine, the catheter rather disturbingly embedded in his neck—either his kidneys had gotten it *bad*, or some of that puncture damage had hit the large intestine. There was an oxygen mask over his face, right below the domino mask someone (Doc Thompkins) had scrounged up to preserve some of that precious anonymity, and a clear bag of fluids feeding into his arm, but at least no nasal cannula. No heart-lung machine. It could have been a lot worse. It had been worse before.

Robin crossed straight to his older brother's bedside as soon as the door was open, and stood there, watching, as if he expected Nightwing to sense his presence and shake off the damage and sedatives instantaneously. Red Robin made for the end of the bed, looked Grayson over once, and then picked up the tablet computer clipped there and started paging through what was presumably Nightwing's chart. Jason lingered just inside the door, even as Rourdan shut it behind him.

"The surgery went well," Drake reported for the benefit of the whole room, once he had thoroughly perused the digital record. He claimed the tiny stylus and began adding notations of his own. Probably supplementing the medical history with things Doc Thompkins couldn't remember or had missed during her estrangement. "And there's been no issue with the blood replacement."

"He'll recover?" asked Robin, for once not picking any kind of fight.

Drake shrugged tightly as he replaced the tablet. "It looks like that's up to him."

The boy stood still for a few seconds. Glaring at the patient, Jason was sure, even though he could only see the back of the kid's head. His hair was a mess. "Survive," Robin commanded crisply.

Jason chuckled. "I'm sure he'll get right on that now you've said so, Baby Bird."

"When will he wake?" the bird demanded of Drake, ignoring the kibitzer.

"Not before tomorrow," the middle child answered. Having exhausted the paperwork, he was staring at Grayson, too. "Leslie predicts eight to ten hours; she knows him well enough it's probably not a major overestimate."

"Within eight, then." Robin scowled at the oldest bird. "I expect a full recovery."

Too adorable for words. Though also disturbingly like his father. Was that a heritage thing or a mimicry thing? "Anything you want to say, Red?" Jason asked his replacement. Drake shook his head.

Damian shot Drake a dark look. "Unconcerned, or just exercising your paranoia?" He included Jason in his glower. "We're *both* on his hit list, you know," he informed Jason. Which, if true, meant *all three of them* had plotted or attempted to kill the other two. What a lovely family this was.

"Of all things to bond over," Jason shook his head, approaching the bed finally. "He looks better," he announced, because Dick really did, mechanical support notwithstanding. Nothing to give you perspective on hospitalization like waiting for someone to die any second. His damp gloves were really starting to itch. "He's not going to lose the leg, right?" he asked Drake, earning him a pair of dirty looks for even raising the idea.

"No," said Red Robin glacially.

"Not dead *and* two legs. Score." The dirty looks didn't really go away, not that he'd really expected them to, and Jason rolled his shoulders. "Just looking on the bright side, here. He was doing the whole 'pool of blood' thing earlier."

Red Robin glanced down, at that—at Jason's knees. Maybe he'd been wondering earlier if that stiff look was blood, and if so, whose. Well, now he knew. That was indeed the edgy 'kneeling in blood' fashion chic. Hey, little Demon Bird's right gauntlet spikes had purple alien gore crusted on them. Bodily fluids were all the rage.

"He's tough," Jason said. A sort of peace offering.

"Nightwing's strong," Red Robin agreed.

Robin scrubbed at the edge of his mask with the heel of his green-gloved hand. It was the second time now that he'd made that gesture, and Jason narrowed his eyes, then shot a sidelong look at Red Robin's drawn face. He'd caught four instances of muscle tremors since the birdboys had turned up, and he was thinking they weren't *all* from suppressed emotion

after all. They weren't just frustrated, and they weren't just tired, Jason was getting the feeling they were *exhausted*.

There'd been an Arkham breakout a few days ago, hadn't there? Nobody important, so he'd forgotten about it till now, but the Bats tended to get 'all hands on deck' about that kind of thing, and if the aliens had followed it up right away, no wonder the quality of their banter had suffered.

"Eight hours, huh," he remarked, testing the waters. "Bit long to camp out in Waiting Room Sugar Cube."

"Maybe for you," Damian snipped. "But you have served your purpose. You may go."

Brat. "Eh, not just yet. Got stuff to finish."

"You are *pathetic*, Todd."

Definitely not getting enough sleep. "That was weak, kid. So, *Red Robin*, you do field commanding stuff. How are you breaking up the watch with Little Bird here till it's time to go home?"

"I don't follow his orders," Robin felt the need to interject.

Drake made a kind of hilariously delicate grimace, presumably at the prospect of further Robin-wrangling. "We'll work something out," he told Jason.

"Tt. I'm sure neither Father nor Grayson requires either of your assistance."

"This is a League facility," said Red Robin, "but that doesn't mean we can leave Nightwing alone."

"I didn't say we should. Only that we have no need of failures. If any of the staff serving here are worth *anything*—"

"Saker fammak, Ibn al Xuff'asch," Jason ordered sharply, and the boy's mouth snapped shut in shock. No one had spoken to him in anything but English, let alone called him *that*, since he'd come to Gotham.

Then Damian realized he'd actually obeyed Jason, and shot the most poisonous of glares from behind his green mask.

Jason smirked. Talia had assiduously kept the two of them separated and ignorant of one another while she'd been raising Damian and patronizing Jason, but he had a lot of contacts in her organization, and after he'd known what to poke around for, he'd found traces of the boy's existence, including his formal name, the one he was generally referred to by among those peons who knew of him at all. Damian ibn al Xuff'asch. *Son of the Bat*.

It was weird, actually. Surrounded by orphans, and this one kid was completely defined by his parents. It could make you glad to have none. Or you could say Jason had had four, but none of them had exactly worked out. He was no one's son.

"Replacement, go home and get your six hours," he continued, as if high-handed direction coming from him was perfectly natural. See how many commands he could make stick. "Make sure the brat eats something. I'll hold down the fort here, and when you get back, maybe he'll be about ready to wake up."

"You want us to entrust Grayson's protection to *you*?" the batbaby sneered.

"I was thinking more along the lines of entrusting me with the boring part," Jason replied, honestly, "but given Doctor Thompkins and I are the people here who saved his life today, sure. Entrust us."

The sneer deepened until it had bent the kid's face completely out of shape. "What fool would trust you with anything, Todd? You are so inconstant even your *hate* cannot be relied upon."

"Damian," said Drake sharply. Jason wasn't sure whether he was imitating Bruce or Dick with that reprimand, but he turned to Jason immediately and said in his own level manner, "He has a point, though. It seems like every time I meet you you're someone different."

"Well, the person I am today protects birds," Jason declared, with a shrug, letting it all roll off him. "Seriously, I should join the frigging Audubon Society here." He jerked his chin toward the figure in the bed. "He wanted me to fill in as eldest while he was out of commission, so here I am."

"Tt. As if you could serve as a substitute for Grayson."

Jason rolled his eyes. "It's kind of my specialty, mini-bird." He turned back to Drake before that conversation could go any further. "So head back to the main nest, regroup, reassure the nice old man, get some shut-eye."

Red Robin watched him, narrow-eyed, trying to suss out his true intentions.

They weren't actually complicated. The thing was, they'd be here tomorrow, either way. If he left, there was no way he was coming back.

"Look," Jason said, "I may be a violent, *inconstant* souvabitch, but I keep my promises." Which was why he so rarely made any. "I got him here and I'm seeing that through, and when he wakes up, I'm not putting up with him bitching about you two working yourselves into the ground on my watch. You think I didn't notice you're about two days past collapsing? How many stimulants are you on?"

"Do you promise?" asked Red Robin, intent, and also detail-oriented as fuck, zooming right in on that potential loophole. Not denying the accusation, which was basically admission in itself. Jason gave him even odds on some light hallucinating.

"Drake," Robin hissed. "He is our *enemy*."

"Not today," said Red Robin, not looking away from Red Hood.

"I promise," said Jason, not looking away either. "Nothing's getting near the Golden Boy till you get back."



It wasn't as easy as that, of course; there followed another ten minutes of furious whispering over Grayson's bed, and then another five in the hall after Rourdan kicked them out. There was bargaining, attempted blackmail, and at least one briefly lost temper, but in the end Jason won. He got to stay in the hospital all night and guard a man he'd fought against as often, and more fiercely, than he'd fought beside him.

Sometimes he *really* wondered about his own sanity.

## Chapter End Notes

Bulleter (Alix 'The Spear That Was Never Thrown' Harrower) is an accidental meta who mostly did Justice League related cameos after her 2005 series ended. She's apparently the true lineal heir of the prehistoric first superhero, though her design is based on the Golden Age Bulletgirl, who threw herself headfirst at things by the power of ultimate helmet. I like her attitude.

'Captain Marvel, Junior' dates from 1941, as Fawcett Comics' edgy, socially conscious response to Robin. (Seriously, all these dark storylines and commentary on poverty, it's pretty cool.) His invocation was 'Captain Marvel,' because he was basically subletting powers via Billy Batson, and he became Captain Marvel's successor 'Shazam' in 2008, continuing his long-established hilarious inability to introduce himself.

His actual name is Freddy Freeman, disabled orphan, and Jason did, in fact, kill his ancient nemesis Captain Nazi during 'Under the Red Hood', an ignominious end to what I'm going to call a sixty-four-year feud. (Repeated retconning means it's actually more complicated than that; don't care.) CM3 and the third Robin were in Young Justice together, but between Tim's new suit and Freddy's new \*body\*, they're free to pretend to be strangers. Freddy may not actually be sure he does know Red Robin, but either way, neither of them has the spare emotion or energy right now to navigate the 'we were kind of friends but haven't spoken in years, how are you?' zone.

Punisher!Batman and Jason-as-Red-Robin dialogue about cracking jokes and heads taken from Countdown to Final Crisis #14. That was Earth-51. Batman!Jason was on Earth-15. Countdown actually sheds a lot of light on Battle for the Cowl and the form Jason's crazy took in it. Tim really did stay home worrying when Batman went to rescue his parents from 'The Obeah Man,' and the thing where Damian broke into Tim's files and found his 'hit list' was in...a 2010 Red Robin story? I think? Eh. (The list was of 'people he considered likely to do bad things' rather than 'people he was plotting to kill,' despite the name.)

Ibn al Xuff'asch was Damian's name way back in the Kingdom Come setting circa 1996, where he grew up as Ra's' successor, then joined Batman anyway, turned the League of Shadows into a humanitarian organization, and married Dick's daughter. (He'd previously appeared as an infant in a storyline that was retconned away, so Kingdom

Come is the only reason the Damian we know ever happened.) 'Saker fammak' is one of several ways to say shut up in Arabic; more literally 'shut your mouth.'

Jason's hookup with Talia happened in the last issue of Red Hood: Lost Days. Up to that point she kept trying to assert a maternal role and Jason kept rejecting her, which said a lot because pre-mortem Jason always leapt at any mother figure on offer. (Pre-Crisis he bonded with a darkness-themed supervillainess, and Bruce was oddly okay with this.) But then Ra's was dead and Talia blamed Bruce, so she symbolically renounced him by sleeping with his son. So many issues.

...that was a remarkable number of notes. I hereby pledge to exercise restraint in future chapters.

Edit 5/17 to add *another* note: It has been brought to my attention that in issue #177 of Robin vol. 4, when Tim first encountered the Red Robin suit, Jason was not the one wearing it, although he was present. Thanks to PrezKoko for asking for more details and causing me to recheck my sources! The relevant sentence has been amended.

# I Thought of You

## Chapter Notes

Jason makes a slightly obscure board game analogy in this chapter. Go (wéiqí or igo, or baduk if you're Korean) is a strategy game for two, in which victory is calculated in terms of open territory dominated, with every piece that is 'captured' subtracted from its owner's final score.

Black moves first. All the conditions Jason specifies for Batman are standard forms of handicap for a strong player facing a weaker one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

An hour later, Jason had staked out the hallway while Superman ducked in and confirmed Nightwing's vital status, and then while, surprisingly, Roy Harper came and did the same. Harper had his non-mechanical arm in a cast, which explained why he was here, and he didn't even give Jason a funny look.

"The real storm of well-wishers will get here once he's awake," the archer said instead as he was leaving, to Jason, who congratulated himself for having interrupted the fading Nightwing before he could give him whatever message he'd been going to send this guy. (Apparently the same one he'd had for his ex-fiancée, which...had he and Harper had a *thing* at some point? Nah, Grayson was probably just feeling bad he'd barely talked to either of them in years. Bluebird kind of slept around, but wasn't sneaky enough to hide it if all his 'friends' were actually his personal harem. *Probably*. Heh.)

"I'll be long gone by then," said Jason.

Harper smirked and left.

Jason went and got another coffee when Flash turned up with his daughter. One fewer encounter was one less temptation to make another scene. See? Not a fucking baby-eating zombie. Asshole.

Now he'd finished the coffee, and dropped into the chair one of the visitors had pulled up to the side of the bed. That position left his back to the entrance, but who were they kidding? This wasn't really guard duty, this was a freaking *vigil*. Nobody was getting in, but Nightwing might still tag out. Jason could watch the bouncing green line on the heart monitor from here. The room was very white and very quiet.

"Seems I'll never be done putting you boys back together," said a voice from the door.

"Doctor Thompson," Jason greeted, glancing over his shoulder at her, briefly. She looked as weary as she sounded, but as she crossed to the bed she didn't take the chair tucked into the

corner on the other side. She came up behind the seated Jason instead, gazed over his shoulder at the patient.

"You *can* call me Leslie, you know."

She didn't wait for him to comment on this offer, but sighed. "Look at him." Nightwing, she meant. "It's hard to believe he's older now than Batman was when he first started out. Seems like just yesterday I first saw him in those little pixy boots, and thought Bruce had finally lost what was left of his mind."

Jason snorted. It was kind of not funny, except it one hundred percent was. Those *shoes*. Looking back, Jason wished he'd had the guts to push for a costume change. At least some *tights*. "Circus sense of fashion," was what he said.

"The outfit was the least of it." The doc was caught somewhere between bitter and droll. "When *he* was nine, he was just starting to pick all those schoolyard fights, and he took this little boy into confrontations with murderers?" Leslie shook her head. Rested a hand on Jason's shoulder. He could barely feel it through the thick leather, but he still went tense as a bow. It hadn't been that hard having her behind him, because if there was anyone in the world he trusted not to slit his throat it was Doc Thompkins, but people did not touch him. Nuh-uh.

"I've made a life's work of putting together things that will only come apart again, but you boys..." Her throat clicked as she swallowed. "I thought I was done with this."

"Don't lump me in with him," Jason protested, half-joking. The thin hand on his shoulder squeezed a little.

"Don't think you can dodge this," she teased with a sniff. "I saw entirely too much of you those three years, and that was with home suturing between my visits."

"I don't get hurt as much now," Jason offered, after a moment. He fought smarter, these days. Still went up against overwhelming odds about as often, but now he planned it better. Plotted. Whatever. Control the ground and you controlled the fight. Make them come to you. Had it really taken dying to get that through his head? Then again, superheroing was a very reactionary field. You had to wait for someone to do something before you could stop them doing it, which ceded initial control of the encounter so often it got to be a habit, even for Batman.

It was like always playing white in a game of go, and also letting the other guy place three or four stones before the game even started, *and* giving him extra points to start off, without knowing how good a player he was. Ballsy, but dumb. He also got all the rematches he wanted, and if he even beat you once, he won it all.

Or a whole lot more than you ever did, at least. Pound of flesh or so.

That analogy broke down a bit for heroes with powers, since the Flash pretty much got infinite turns, and Superman got, like, thirty moves every turn and the ability to move his opponents' stones around the board at will if he felt like it. And Martian Manhunter could

read your mind *and* throw in chess pieces for special bizarre strategies unavailable to everyone else. And so on.

So Bruce was basically an idiot. Albeit one who was pretty good at strategy games.

"Do you remember that time you were shot," Leslie asked. He would have told her that wasn't enough information, but she continued, "Fighting the Mad Hatter, I believe. Four bullets, right into your torso. I had to cut one of them out. Miracle your lungs both survived. Your vitals crashed four times while I was trying to stabilize you."

He did remember, of course. Two months in recovery before Bruce would let him even resume something *like* his normal training, another month after that before he'd been allowed on patrol. It was the longest he'd been benched the entire time he'd been Robin.

"You nearly died," Leslie told him, and there was no catch in her voice, only a grave certainty that seemed out of place, considering he *hadn't* died that time, he'd died later. And it hadn't even stuck then. No big. (Well, okay, yes big, but. Dying was kind of traumatic; near misses still didn't count. Even the scars were gone, now.) "There should have been a whole team working on you, but instead it was only me, in my clinic, in the middle of the night. I was furious."

"You didn't have to go along with it," Jason pointed out.

She sighed. "I didn't *have* to, but there was no way to put a stop to it without ruining him. I couldn't just turn my back."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, if I ever refused to help, and that was the reason someone died..." Her voice trailed off in a way Jason knew as *that is the stuff of my unspoken nightmares*. But she'd still set up that exact scenario to smuggle Brown away from her enemies. "But...I was also obligated to him. Or I always felt like I was."

"What, for funding your clinic?" Bruce Wayne wasn't above extorting cooperation out of someone by withholding funds, but he'd always had a very personal stake in the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic in Crime Alley. And *generally* he only did that to enemies, anyway. Besides, Leslie had always struck him as the opposite of the mercenary type. Would go under rather than sell out.

She flicked a hand dismissively. "Only a little. No, I...let him down a long time ago, and spent years paying for it."

This was beginning to sound like exactly the kind of juicy secret he would normally love, except he didn't *want* Doc Thompkins to have juicy secrets. He wanted her to do things because they were right, not because Batman twisted favors out of her.

...of all heroes to still believe in after all this time, he was hanging on to *Leslie Thompkins*?

He shrugged her hand off his shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

"I was his foster-mother." Jason twisted around in his chair at that to stare unabashedly up at the old lady. "Didn't you know?" Leslie asked, rhetorically, as she came forward to stand to his left. She'd returned her eyes to Dick's face, and Jason was content to keep her in his peripheral vision and watch the green line of the heart monitor in its jagged dance.

"I didn't."

"Martha and Thomas were both on bad terms with their extended families; arranged that Alfred and I should be given joint legal custody of their boy if anything were to happen to them. Prepared for everything, the Waynes."

Jason had not realized that was a family trait; obviously this was a different value of 'prepared' and 'everything,' given the previous generation had been killed in a mugging.

"In practice Alfred had full physical custody. I visited at least once a week, most weeks at least, but..." She shook her head. "I tell myself sometimes it was my fault. The way he turned out. I have for years."

Jason's stomach twisted, but he didn't interrupt.

"He needed something—a lot of things—*parenting* that I didn't provide. He pushed me away, and I let him. We let him go his own way, for the most part, and when we did try to punish him it seemed to slide off his back without his even noticing. He didn't see himself as answerable to us. He never even had to tell me I wasn't his mother.

"I should have put my foot down after he bit his therapist, when he refused to attend any more counseling sessions with anyone. I should have made him talk to me after the first time he was suspended for fighting. I should have brought him to the clinic more often and made him part of my everyday life, kidnap risk or not.

"But I never did, and by the time he reached high school, I think he told me the truth once or twice a year. He lied about his grades, about his hobbies, about the friends he didn't have, about his *favorite foods*, and I knew something was wrong, something more comprehensive than just a terribly prolonged grieving process, but I couldn't guess what."

Huh. Jason contemplated Bruce Wayne as a teenage boy who didn't have a secret life yet but *planned* to, compulsively lying to everyone about everything. Purposely, completely alone. It fit. It was weird as hell to think about, but it made sense.

He had to admit that he had never thought seriously about what Bruce had been like growing up. It seemed like he must always have been the same uncompromising wall of a man, untouched by anything, or at least like there had been no intermediate stages between the boy crying over his parents' corpses and the Batman.

Like Batman had sprung forth fully formed from little Brucie's forehead, and left the child to lie with his mother and father. Okay, that was morbid even for him.

But Leslie had watched the intermediate stages. In fact, she was still talking about them.

"He kept me out. And why not? I was never there for him. Too busy sewing up the wounds in other people, hurts that were easier to see. He was an obligation I didn't know how to handle. I never once thought of him as *mine*. And Alfred was always there, but he never lets down his guard. *Reserve*, whatever you want to call it. Bruce learned that too well, I think."

She sighed. "I cared, Jason. But I wasn't prepared to put my life on hold, leave my work and the people who needed me and move into Wayne Manor to take care of a boy I barely knew, when Alfred Pennyworth already had it in hand, and Bruce was such a difficult child...I didn't try hard enough," she concluded.

"He's not the easiest person to get close to." Jason said it without judgment. He wasn't sure how to handle the role of confidant, but 'stoic' seemed to be working.

"And never was," Leslie agreed. "Though he was a very sweet boy when he was small...you know?" She went distant again. "I have the clearest memory of him giving me a crayon drawing of a fire truck, the Christmas he was five. He wanted to be a fireman at the time.

"Thomas was always hugely generous with gifts to his friends and I appreciated everything, of course, but I *treasured* that picture. I already knew I'd never have any children of my own...I suppose that's why Thomas chose me. I wouldn't try to steal the family money, and I already loved him. It should have been enough."

She was silent a moment. "I went looking for the drawing recently. It turns out I must have lost it at least three clinics ago."

"It was just a thing," said Jason, knowing it wasn't.

Leslie sighed. "Martha and Thomas always made such a point of having time for him, time to be a family. Alfred and I never intended to replace them, and didn't realize until too late that we couldn't help it." Her mouth twisted wryly. "My life has always been my work, and Alfred is the same. And there I sat in Gotham's slums, trying to hold back the sea with my hands, because I *had* to. And then I complained when he followed my example."

Jason let out an incredulous laugh, then looked instinctively toward the still figure in the bed, as though noise could have woken him from that level of stupor. "Pretty sure no one would ever think of it that way."

"Neither did I," Leslie agreed, tucking her chin and giving him a wry look that took nearly ten years off her, just for a second. "It was something *he* said, that night, after you were shot, when we were waiting to see if you'd pull through. I told him all he could do for you was pray, and started scolding him about it all, the risk to you, the cost to him, demanding justifications, and Batman asked me for mine and then turned it back on me. *Because I have to*. It took me until after I left Gotham to begin to realize how I failed him. And then I was still so angry..."

"*You* were angry at *him*?" It wasn't that Jason didn't figure she had been, but she'd been putting on such an act at the time she left Gotham, who knew what had actually been going on in her head, and the version of the story he'd gotten had focused on her fleeing the city from the wrath of an enraged Bat.

"It was *his* plans to cause a 'controlled' mob war that she stole and put into practice. It was him she was trying to impress. He was the one that offered her the approval and guidance she needed so much for his own petty, selfish reasons, and then took them away when she didn't do exactly as he wanted. I knew he was trying to protect her, in his incompetent repressed way, that Stephanie was giving him nightmarish flashbacks to the months before we lost you, every time she defied him, but..."

She shook her head, sharply. "It was his mess, beginning to end. If I hadn't been so angry, I would have let him in on the deception; he'd mourn more convincingly *faking* it than while suppressing real pain. But I wanted him to suffer."

"I know the feeling," Jason deadpanned.

"Yes," Leslie agreed, with very little irony, "I suppose you do."

Jason blew out a breath, tired of playing along. "Why are you saying this to *me*?"

"Aren't you part of this family?" Leslie smiled a little, sadly, and didn't give him a chance to deny it. "Richard is in no state to listen, and Timothy will already never forgive me, and it's not really Stephanie's business, and I'd only wound Alfred, who has regrets enough of his own without carrying mine, and I can't say any of it to Bruce. Not yet, maybe never. Too much bad blood over the years to start apologizing now for the beginning." She nodded a little to herself, confirming her own reasoning. "But I thought you should know."

Jason squinted up sidelong at her. "So you'd tell Dickiebird if he was awake?"

"Probably not," she admitted. "Even when they fight, the two of them are..."

"A unit, yeah. Are you trying to get me to mend fences or something?"

Leslie didn't answer right away, frowning. "I always thought that was a strange expression. Fences keep people apart, don't they?"

"Good fences make good neighbors," said Jason, and then grinned a little, sharklike. "Especially if you've got a lot of hot goods to move."

She swatted his arm. "Stop that. You're better than that."

She said it mildly, with quiet conviction, but Jason felt rage unfold in his chest. He'd just been trying to enjoy a goddamned *pun*. "What do you know?" he snapped. Got out of his chair for the first time, and stepped back till he was standing nearer Dickiebird's knees and could look her in the face. "What the *hell* do you think you know about me?"

"I know that when you were six years old you filled your pockets with cotton balls from my exam room, so you could stuff a pillow as a mother's day present," she said calmly, looking right back. Jason felt the statement like a kick in the gut. She noticed that? She *remembered* that? How did she even *know* why he'd stolen her goddamned cotton? "Catherine showed it to me, once, when I had her in overnight."



It had been the ugliest thing, held together with safety pins, but she'd held onto it long after it ceased to be anything like a pillow. Vomited all over it a couple of years later, and Jason had thrown it away with the puke.

"I know that when you were ten you sent two older boys to me with broken bones for bullying little Anna Rosa."

Anna Rosa had been three years younger than Jason, the most beautiful little girl in Gotham, and blind from birth. She'd been safer than she should logically have been, living with her overworked mother in Crime Alley, because one of the few local rules had been that *no one* messed with Anna Rosa. Those boys had been new, hadn't understood how it worked.

Two Face had cut Anna Rosa in half while Jason had been training in Tibet.

"I know that when you were thirteen you saved at *least* four hundred lives, just directly. Should I have stopped you?"

It was an honest question. She'd blamed herself for him, too. Not just for Bruce.

He shook his head. Taken Robin from him? What would that have helped? "I'd never have forgiven you."

"Isn't that always the way?" She shook her head, a wry smile on her face, and looked back down at Dick. "No, I'm not trying to push you into making up with Bruce, Jason. *I* haven't made up with him. Perhaps I'm trying to talk myself into trying. I had...the most terrible mixed feelings when I got word of his death."

"It wasn't real." Jason had felt the same way.

"It was real enough. I actually felt *freed*, once it was confirmed, like an oppressive force had vanished, and then I realized what I was thinking and then...well, I very nearly fell apart. I kept seeing him...that night...so tiny, with the blood spatter still across his face...." She pressed a hand over her mouth, and Jason was afraid she was going to cry.

She reached out and straightened the blanket over Nightwing's chest instead. "So many regrets," she said quietly. "So many things I never said. And now I have another chance, and I'm still not saying them."

"So talk to him."

Her situation was different from his. Not necessarily fixable, but different. He'd said everything he had to say, and it hadn't mattered. She was old. She shouldn't die without getting this off her chest. Telling him didn't count.

Leslie shook her head. "He doesn't want anyone in his life he can't control. Maybe I helped teach him that, too. Of the two of us, the one who took orders was also the one who never let him down."

"He relied on you," Jason pointed out. "Even if you feel like you weren't there for him, he still let you help him more than pretty much anyone."

She sighed, and then smiled at him. "Weren't you worried *I* was trying to get *you* to make peace?"

Jason spread his hands. "Hey, I don't care if you get along or not. I just think he should get the 'sorry I messed you up so bad you made terrible life choices' speech." See how he liked it.

Leslie's eyes stayed warm and amused. Fond, even. "You know, you reminded me of him before the two of you ever met."

Jason stared at her in flat disbelief. "I reminded you of a billionaire who dressed up as a bat at night."

Leslie shrugged. "Mostly of the little boy who kept coming home with bloody knuckles, but yes. Something in the eyes, I think."

Jason knew, without particularly wanting to, the exact shades of all the Bats' eyes—memorizing that sort of thing had been drilled into him as Robin; it helped to be able to distinguish impostors as well as track down suspects, and it was a useful skill so he'd kept it up.

And he had *studied* them, as family and then as enemies. He knew that Bruce's eyes were steel-blue, sharpening to blowtorch-pale when he got especially emotional; that Replacement's were blue-grey; that the little demon's were almost black; that Dickiebird's were the kind of bright, clear blue real people just shouldn't *have*. That his own had been the greenest, even before the Pit.

Jason's hand brushed red hair back from his own face. "I don't look like him."

Leslie's cool, withered hand wrapped itself around his, pulled it away from the hair it had taken him so long to stop dyeing. "I thought you did." She kept her hand in his as she added, "Martha's hair was red, you know."

Of course he knew what color Martha Wayne's hair had been; Bruce kept pictures of them all over the damn place. He'd bet anything there wasn't a single picture of him anywhere in the Manor. "I really doubt he was thinking of his mom when he picked me up off the street."

"I don't think he was thinking of anyone but you."

Jason gave her a nasty, incredulous look, from which she didn't flinch, even as he pulled his hand away. "You sure you aren't on his side here?"

"I'm not." She moistened her lips, forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. He wished he were still sitting down so they could talk without looking at each other. "He and I disagree about a huge number of things. I despair of him more and more as time goes by. But...I've known him a very long time, and he isn't really heartless. He cares too much, sometimes, and can't cope with it."

"Hm," Jason said noncommittally. Heartless, no; he wouldn't bother trying to hurt Batman if he thought he was *totally* unfeeling.

"The thing about Bruce Wayne," Leslie said, very quietly, as if it had only just occurred to her that someone might be listening in, "the thing I could never dislike, was that he had the chance to turn his back on all of it. He could have done anything he wanted. Anything at all. Never had to see or think an unpleasant thing in his life, if he was careful. Most people, given the chance, devote most of the resources available to them to not having to deal with unpleasantness, with ugliness or pain.

"But high-handed and arrogant as wealth sometimes made him, Bruce has always used everything he had to drive himself headfirst against the brick wall of human suffering."

Not the way Jason had *ever* thought of the man, even when he'd been at his fondest. But he'd met a surprisingly large number of millionaires at this point. Most of them were useless. Many were outright parasitic. Some were monsters. As huge as his personal grudge against Batman was, Jason could acknowledge that there was a clear difference between him and, say, Lex Luthor.

Even *more* difference between him and Luthor's less insane millionaire colleagues, but still.

He found a crooked half of a smile for Leslie. "So maybe you were a good example after all?"

She choked out a little laugh. "Jason." She shook her head in a 'that's just like you' kind of way, and smiled up at him. "I'm so glad you're alive."

Jason couldn't actually say anything for a moment. His throat had closed. This was the closest he'd felt to crying since...years. No one else had said that. No one else had been glad.

Talia had come the closest, Talia with her desperate ferocity, *forcing* him to move beyond the half-alive state she'd found him in, refusing to give him up. For her Beloved's sake, of course, but he had felt obligated to her for that far more than for the training or resources or even the Pit itself.

(Bruce might have been glad, if he'd found out differently. Maybe, maybe Dick too. They'd been sorry he died, but his coming back didn't actually erase that screw-up from the record. Didn't change anything. All it meant was that Jason was back. And that didn't matter.

...what about Alfred?)

"You know I'm the Red Hood," he said. Leslie spent her time rubbing elbows with everyone who swung in off Crime Alley; he didn't need to say any of the things he'd done under that name, for her to know what he meant.

Leslie nodded.

"But you're still glad I came back."

He needed to be sure she knew what she was saying.

"Yes."

Leslie hesitated for a moment, then. "My clinic doesn't discriminate between patients," she said carefully. "I've had survivors of some of your attacks come in. I have criminals of all kinds. I've pulled people back from the brink *knowing* that when they walked out my doors they were likely to go kill someone else, and I was still glad I'd saved them."

Jason drew a sharp breath. "I'm not the same as them." The warm, comforted feeling from a minute ago was gone, and the space left behind whistled with wind. It felt a little like his organs had all been scooped out, except he could still feel his heart. Clenching. *Dammit*. Why did he ever risk feeling anything besides anger? It wasn't ever worth it.

"You're not," Leslie agreed quietly. Reached up to put her hand on his shoulder again, and he let her. He wasn't sure why. "You mean much more to me than just one of my patients." She tightened her mouth, closed her eyes for a moment, and then caught his and insisted softly, "But you can't weigh people's lives on a scale. People aren't worth more and less than one another."

Jason made a sharp, scornful sound in his throat. "Of course they are."

"Jason..."

"Those pieces of shit? They're worth the same as you, or...or Anna Rosa? You really think that?"

"In the most general sense, yes." Leslie sighed, squeezed his shoulder, and let her hand fall, and with it her eyes. "Everyone deserves to be saved. Some people make it hard. Some people I put back together over and over and it never seems to make any difference. But the world doesn't divide into victims and villains."

"You want to save everyone?" Jason scoffed.

"That's a bit beyond me," Leslie chuckled. "No. I'll save whoever I can from whatever I can, and try to get everyone else to save whoever *they* can. It's the only way anything can ever change for the better."

Jason's tongue struck pointlessly against the back of his teeth a few times, and then he shook his shoulders and stepped out of range of any more grabbing. "You're Batman's mom, all right." He clenched his fists, turned so he didn't have to look at her, his back to the bed. "I save people," he pointed out, in a low voice. He did. "But some people aren't worth it."

"How do you tell?" Leslie had crossed her arms, when he peeked out the corner of his eye, had most of her weight on her heels. Raised her eyebrows at him. "How can you tell who deserves what? You don't know them. I'm not talking about the Joker, or even Harvey Dent and those. You really think you can look at someone once, see them do one thing no matter how bad, and know exactly what they're worth?"

"They sell drugs to kids." That was one of Jason's easiest snap judgments. Anyone who kept breaking that rule, they were done for.

Leslie tapped her fingers on her elbow. "Cigarettes are a hundred times more likely to cost a child his or her life than LSD is. Alcohol is one of the most addictive substances known to man. I assume you have no plans to slaughter anyone for allowing underage access to tobacco or beer."

"You're defending them?" Jason asked, looking sideways at her. "*Really?*"

"Some of them may be irredeemably selfish. Others might be doing the best they can to survive, with nowhere less harmful to turn. Enabling children's self-harm is certainly a not a good choice, but you've made poor decisions yourself. Would it be just, if another vigilante killed you for them?"

Jason stared.

"I've done wrong in the past, and I'm sure I will again. Everyone does. And the only amount of killing that could ever really stop people from making bad decisions is one that left the world empty."

"Well, that's not very optimistic of you. Or is beating bastards bloody supposed to work better?"

"Where there's life there's hope," she shrugged. "They can't change once they're gone. *He* always said he doesn't care about motives, that if people are going to decide to hurt others they deserve what they get, but they're people too, and *he's* hurting *them*. A lot of it's necessary, preventing immediate tragedies—I *am* proud of that, really, everyone saved is important. And he does good work through the Wayne Foundation, but he's never had enough attention for the systemic problems, with all the rest of it clamoring to be addressed. You need a carrot as well as a stick, if you want to lead anyone anywhere."

"Can't I just be the stick?" Jason grinned at the doctor, a meaningless, glinting grin, to show that asking a question didn't mean he was actually offering to let her make decisions for him.

Leslie shrugged a little. "You can be whatever you want to be."

Jason barked out a laugh. "What am I, five? Lay off, Les."

The doctor raised her eyebrows at him, with that dry self-possession that suited her better than mawkishness, that had gotten her through all those decades working alone, holding back the sea, and she didn't press. Went around the bed to check the state of the dialysis machine, instead, and prodded the IV bag the same way the EMT woman had earlier, before going through the digital chart again and making a couple more notes. "He's doing well," she diagnosed. "We'll cut back the sedatives in the morning. There shouldn't be any brain damage. Don't let him try to get up, if you're still here when he wakes."

"Uh, yeah. Hole in his jugular." The whole family had a tendency to bolt from hospital beds and try to find either an opponent or a defensible position, but Grayson really didn't need to bleed out again today.

"He needs his antibiotics and fluids, too," Leslie agreed. Looked up at him again, as she hung stylus and tablet in their places. "Thank you for sitting with him."

He hated that thanks, Leslie overcompensating for his alienation. It felt thin and fake and... undeserved. "Don't actually like leaving a job half-done."

She made a complicated face he couldn't read, ending in a small smile that seemed meant to reassure him she wasn't angry. "I need to get back to my other patients."

Jason nodded. "See you."

Leslie smiled a little more, nodded in return, went to the door, out of his range of vision, and he didn't turn to watch her go. He heard her hesitate. Wasn't really startled when she spoke.

"He did love you, Jason."

"Leave it, Leslie."

"We all did."

"Tch."

She was silent several seconds. "Don't hesitate to visit my clinic next time you're in Gotham, alright? Even if you aren't hurt. My door is never locked to you."

The latch clicked, and she was gone.

Loved him, she said. Hah. Not enough to matter, obviously, and she was probably just applying those stupid rosy glasses again. 'I'm glad you're alive' had been worth a lot more. 'All,' though. He couldn't help wondering.

What *about* Alfred? And even Bruce...

*Would* he have been happy, if Jason had come back sooner, cleaner, less angry?

It wasn't a question that really mattered. He *hadn't*, and granting Batman a little relief from his guilt wasn't even something Jason wished he'd done. Jason's death hadn't mattered like it should have, but maybe the extra years he'd spent feeling responsible for getting his underage soldier killed equaled it out a little. Those five years of guilt might condense to something like the pain he would have felt if he'd lost someone who counted.

Batman *should* have suffered.

Jason took the chair in the back corner, next to the dialysis machine, so he *could* watch the door, although it was now eleven at night and he didn't anticipate more visitors. He could at least be sure he didn't reflexively attack any nurses for having suspicious footsteps. You couldn't see the heart monitor from here, but who needed to?

He slipped a hand into his pocket, and found his knuckles stopped against the plastic bulk of the handheld comm unit he'd been loaned, the one that had spectacularly failed to serve as an

emergency communications device. He'd have been better off calling 911 on a cell phone, if he'd had one. It was heavier than he remembered when he pulled it out. The sides and the activation button were smudged with dark, dried blood, especially in the grooves where it had sunk and couldn't easily rub off from jostling in a pocket. Flakes of Nightwing's blood fell onto the fuzzy blue blanket, and Jason reached out instinctively to brush it off, as if to hide the evidence.

His glove was still damp, and the result was a lurid smear.

Jason grimaced, looked away, found himself staring at the hideous jugular port in the side of Dick's neck, pulling out his recently replenished blood to be cleaned and dumped back in as a sort of detour on its trip down to the heart. They didn't install a neck catheter if you were going to be on dialysis for a long time, right? Infection risk.

He pushed the stained comm button, and the result was static. Out of effective range? Or did the hospital have a blanket communications block? They wouldn't jam just their own frequencies. Maybe the thing was a dud.

Frustrated, Jason shoved the useless device out of sight again, stripped off his itchy gloves and dropped them under his chair next to the empty coffee cup. He'd killed and killed and never felt guilty, so how was the sight of *this* blood, blood he'd grown spotted with by *helping*, making him uncomfortable?

*How does failure taste?* His own voice, warped by memory, stretched and shattered by anger and the fact that he had shouted that question atop a moving train.

*Like blood*, Nightwing told him, as he threw a perfectly committed punch. Failure tastes like blood.

Grayson beat him, that night. The night he tried to kill all the little birds and claim the family legacy. But Jason still won, in a way, because when Dick reached out a hand to save him, Jason said no. Because there is always a choice. No hope, but always choice. No one could make him change. No one could force him to be *saved*.

Grayson beat him, Grayson won the cowl, Grayson refused to die at his hands—but Grayson was the one who screamed.

When Jason fell. When Jason dropped into the darkness all *death before dishonor*, Dick *screamed*.

Nothing else Jason had done that night had thrown him off. Every attempted murder of those he loved, every bomb and trick and drug and—and Grayson had played that video at him, *that video*, Bruce in uniform with the cowl pulled back, calling him *broken*, always broken, worthless, unsalvageable, a waste of a life from the beginning, Grayson had brought that to throw him off and then had the *gall* to act like it was sound, reasonable advice instead of the old man's *last fucking betrayal*....

Jason heard himself hyperventilating, and forced his breath steady.

Grayson had done that. And Grayson had gone the whole fight without losing his cool, even believing the whole time that Drake might be as dead as he'd been told, right until Jason let himself fall.

If I can't win, I will force you to lose. Taste a little more of that blood. From Hell's heart I stab at thee.

But Dick had screamed for him.

Call him hopelessly crazy. Tell him his word was worthless. Drive him into a corner. Look down on him. He'd done all of that. Offering to *reform* him at a moment like that, that didn't mean anything. It was just what a Bat said to a broken creature hanging by a thread.

But no one had made Dick scream when Jason fell.

No matter what, the idiot wouldn't quite give up on him.

He had fucking *better* not give up on himself.

"Let's get this straight," he said to the slumbering bird, drumming his fingers on the blood-stiffened fabric covering one knee. "I die on you. You do *not* die on me. That is how it works. If you die on my watch, I am going to be the one killing you." He paused for a second. "And not today. Because I could smother you with a pillow right now, and that doesn't really prove anything except I'm a mean bastard. And who doesn't know that?"

*I didn't say anything everybody doesn't already **know**.*

Damn Flash anyway.

Silence lay heavy over the small plastic room, so new it had never even needed cleaning. With nothing better to do, Jason pulled out one of the knives he'd used in the battle earlier and his tiny portable whetstone, and started honing the razor edge back on.

"She's right, you know," he told Dick as he worked. All conversations with Nightwing should work this way, with the bird unable to interrupt or even remember what you said later. "You and he fight a lot, but you're still all Dynamic Duo underneath. He only *really* likes to work with you."

Once all his knives were sharpened, Jason checked and re-stowed his razor wire, remaining explosives, and all his infiltration gear, including his second-best digital 'lockpick.' It was amazing how many of the same skills and equipment you needed to be a vigilante, an assassin, and a thief. He would know.

After that there was basically nothing to do.

He sat in the blank, blank room, not really expecting any threats. Jason was, by his own estimate, at least as tough as Tim Drake, and about as stubborn, and approximately as driven, and he could make a good case that he was nearly as patient, *more* patient under the right circumstances. What he did not have was relentless self-discipline. Right now, he was bored.



He leaned back, and listened to Grayson breathe, until his own breath gentled, and darkness crept over him.

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He was in Gotham. He knew it was Gotham, even though it appeared to be the Rue de la Paix in Paris, and knew, too, that if you went to the end of the street and turned left you'd be in Crime Alley. On the hill that rose steeply to the right, Wayne Manor loomed. Jason prodded the crumpled black figure on the cobblestones before him with an investigative toe.

Third Bat, *third*, not fourth because his unorthodox little tenure didn't count, the Bat who never wanted it, who wore the cowl because *someone had to* and everybody else was dead.

"'bout ready to go?" said someone at his elbow, and he turned to grin at her, only to realize he'd already been grinning *because he couldn't stop, he could never, ever stop*.

"Guess so," he allowed.

"Alrighty then, Mistah Jay," the blonde woman chortled, and her face changed as he watched, bright, pigtailed mad loyalty flickering into a sweet, warm lie framed by soft golden curls, but even the second face couldn't harm him now. He laughed.

Let her take his elbow, steer him away from the foot of Wayne Tower, but glanced back at the body in the street, unmoving under its wide, tattered cape.

Batman wasn't dead, probably wouldn't even die, not from this. The question wasn't *whether* he could be killed, it wasn't even how to do it, not with this one. It was how many times he could stand back up, just for duty. How long he could live with nothing. How far he could go before he broke.

"Do you think he'll make it to the little bird in time?" asked his right-hand woman, following his look, as she bounced into her motorcycle sidecar, bells jingling.

"If he can't," Jason answered, shrugging, mounting the bike, *grinning*, "Isn't that the *punchline*?"

## Chapter End Notes

Bulk of references this chapter to the 1987 story 'My Beginning...And My Probable End,' a major brick in establishing Batman's post-Crisis backstory revisions. It was still in continuity up until Flashpoint. Jason is a framing device; the issue is all Bruce and Leslie arguing, punctuated by extensive flashbacks. At the end, when he wakes up, he laughs off a distraught Bat's suggestion that a near-death experience is a good reason to stop being Robin.

The conversation on the train about the taste of failure was the climax of Battle for the Cowl. Which is also where it was established that, despite his vow in Titans of

Tomorrow, Tim *would* take up the legacy if he thought it was necessary.

Everything here about Jason's childhood except its location and his mom I made up. I'm entirely convinced, though, that Catherine loved Jason and acted like it, whatever her other failings, because he never suspected for a second he wasn't hers, until he found his birth certificate. (Speaking of which, the woman Harley turned into at the end there was Sheila Haywood, his treacherous biomom, as she appeared in *A Death in the Family*.)

I practice denial about Damian's eye color. I guess Talia could have had a blue-eye gene lurking recessive in her genome, or maybe she did some kind of gene patch to make him look more like his father when she was tweaking him in pursuit of perfection, and after Connor Hawke's incredible blondness the pale eyes shouldn't seem weird, but they do. He had dark eyes in some of his early appearances; I cling to them. Mutter mutter whitewashing mutter.

# The Years and All The Sadness

## Chapter Notes

Thanks, everybody. Entering the long home stretch now. ^^

Note: Some dialogue quoted below is taken from a miniseries, I believe from '87 again, featuring the (secretly a mind-controlling alien) TV pundit G. Gordon Godfrey turning the public violently against superheroes. Legends, I think it was called? Different hospitalization than the shooting one Leslie talked about last chapter, anyway. Jason seems to have spent a lot of time injured.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jason jerked awake, his neck protesting mightily, which was how he discovered he had fallen asleep. While supposedly on guard duty.

So of course the third person in the room, the one whose motion had woken him, was Batman.

The Dark Knight gazed across Nightwing's bed at him, and Jason felt his hackles rise. "What?" he snapped. "Like I care."

The faintest almost-smile ghosted across Batman's mouth. "If you didn't care, why would you be here?"

Jason took a second to contemplate that, his mouth pulled awry. "Because your eldest is a manipulative bitch," he declared after that pause, flicking a hand at the bird in question.

The smile strengthened and became real, if subtle, if exhausted. "He has been known to display that quality."

Jason had no idea what to do with that, with *agreement* and *smiling*, so he flashed a practiced smirk and shifted in his folding chair, finding a less uncomfortable position and checking he still knew where all his remaining weapons were. There was only one exit, it was closed, and he'd have to get past Batman to reach it.

"While meanwhile I received a bewildered call," the masked man continued, no longer smiling but not angry, "informing me that my second-youngest had come home and was actually sleeping." He tilted his head slightly, considering Jason. "What did you do?"

Jason would have felt considerably more smug if he hadn't been caught napping himself. "Made a deal. I'll report useful stuff to his information network one week for every hour he spends asleep." He wasn't even surprised that the no-longer-so-little bird was running his own

network now. The kid didn't have Grayson's charisma, but he did cultivate a wide range of contacts, and his organizational abilities were kind of terrifying.

Based on that twitch of annoyance and flash of pride, the Bat had mixed feelings about Drake's information network. Heh.

"I see." There was a grudging acknowledgment in those two words, which was in some ways the best kind of acknowledgement from Batman because, A) it was the most likely to be honest and, B) he wasn't happy about giving it, so it was like winning twice. "Why?"

"Grayson said the kid remembers to take care of everyone except himself," said Jason, and then actually, physically bit his tongue. He'd never been the secretive or lying type, aside from the obvious big things, but image was everything. "And Drama Queen here was last-requesting all over the place, so I'm standing in as eldest till he wakes up."

Ow. Not much better.

"Dick often takes responsibility for seeing that Tim gets enough rest," Batman allowed. "But your methods are very different."

Jason rolled his shoulders back and slouched in pronounced disinterest. "What can I say, I'm a different guy."

"He has to fight tooth and nail," continued Batman, as if he hadn't said anything. "Your unorthodox approach may be more effective."

"Nothing unorthodox about bribing kids," Jason argued.

That smile again. "Tim is nineteen."

"Should learn to look after himself already, then."

"I will point out," Batman added, with that detached faint amusement that was kind of freaking Jason out, "that indenturing yourself to him at that rate will rapidly leave you owing him years in advance."

"*Indenturing?*" Jason scoffed. "I bargained information, not services." Batman cocked his head about three degrees and yeah, okay, Red Robin was totally going to be calling him up and trying to get him to investigate this or that specific thing, but Jason was then going to tell him to screw himself, unless the thing actually sounded interesting. "Anyway, I'm not planning to make a habit of it," he added, much more relevantly. "Just till this moron takes the job back."

"And after that..."

It wasn't an actual question; Jason was expected to helpfully finish the sentence without the Bat having to either request or demand the information, and disrupt the tenuous accord they'd somehow achieved.

Like Jason was going to make anything easy. He smiled blandly, like he was waiting for Batman to pull himself together and complete the thought, until the older man narrowed his eyes slightly and spoke with more force, which was a relief because if Batman read too much into the craziness of today and tried to pretend they were family the way Dickiebird had, with neither of them conveniently being in the middle of dying, Jason wasn't sure what he'd do but it would totally give the Flash material to say I-told-you-so. Fuck Flash anyway.

"I assume," Batman said, annoyance at having to put forth a hypothesis etched in every syllable, "that you intend to resume your recent peripatetic lifestyle."

"Peripatetic?" Jason repeated, just short of hooting with derision. 'Nomadic' would have been one thing, or 'rootless' or really anything less ridiculous than *peripatetic*. Batman wasn't normally the kind to use a five-syllable word where a two-syllable one would do; he liked knowledge and precision but he liked efficiency, too. Verbosity was one of his only solid tells; it happened a lot when he was avoiding a subject.

Jason squinted at the man, zeroing in on the actual information encoded in the fatuous remark. "You've been tracking me?" He wouldn't have thought even Batman *could*, not without dedicating a number of man-hours equal to practically a whole operative, which Jason wasn't worth, not over that kind of timescale. Not if you weren't at the very least regularly trying to take him down.

Batman drew himself up very slightly, looking at the dialysis machine now instead of Jason. "Your methods are fairly distinctive."

"You've been tracking my *kills*?" Jason was incredulous. His methods *weren't* that distinctive, either; he didn't have a particular kill style or signature, besides the occasional piece of poetic justice. He used whatever worked. Bruce probably meant his skills in combination with his choice of target, in the absence of any active contracts on the slimeballs' heads.

Human traffickers, drug kingpins, the heads of three terrorist groups Jason didn't like and the technically-legal leader of a small African nation that had been fucked to hell by Bialyan abuses under Queen Bee, and then taken over by an incredibly corrupt oligarchy funded by foreign interests. He'd kind of expected that last one to net some attention, but so far as he could tell international media was assuming the assassin had been a local.

Batman knew better.

Jason watched him. Rose to his feet, calculated motion, not out-of-control, not too threatening, but it would put extra pressure on Batman all the same. It was nice being tall. "You knew what I was doing," he laid the fact out like a gauntlet, "but you didn't try to stop me."

Blankness, as the masked eyes met his on the level, with just the faintest shade of irritation leaking in when he spoke. "There were more urgent cases."

"So those guys I killed...they weren't worth your time." Well, there'd been two women, but semantic detail, eh. Point was, Batman was a hypocrite. It wasn't that Jason had *wanted* to be

caught, but that Batman hadn't bothered trying—he knew those scum deserved to die, but he'd never dirty himself with it. *Bastard.*

"The amount of time it would have taken to predict and apprehend you was better spent protecting a number of innocent lives."

"And yet you always have time to save the Joker."

Sharper irritation. "When people try to kill him in front of me, *yes.*" This was the closest Bruce had ever come to giving Jason permission to kill, but like so many other things he had wrested from the man, it tasted like ashes. It was *you don't matter even enough to hunt and I can ignore you if you stay out of my way.* "I have rules."

"You have fucking stupid short-sighted selfish restrictions. But why would I expect anything else from you?"

There was a moment in which it looked like he'd finally managed to draw a real rise out of the man, and then as he watched Batman strangled it down and ground his teeth silently. "You bastard," Jason added. A little more frustrated than he really wanted to sound because this was moving the ground under his feet, this standing face to face with Batman and no one interfering and neither of them had thrown a punch. How long had it been? Years and years.

*He did love you, Jason.* Leslie, with her rosy memories of a little Bruce Wayne who wanted to be a fireman. He'd always thought of her as a tough, hard-assed old lady, but he shouldn't be surprised at that lack of realism. Her specialty was hope, after all, and she worked in Crime Alley.

"Jason..." Bruce said, looking away. He seemed so old, all of a sudden. The suit hid most of it, everything but the deep lines carved into his face since...what? Ten years ago, when Jason had still seen him every day? Under the cowl his hair had begun to grow grey, Jason knew, and his voice had gone rough permanently, as though he'd asked more than his throat could give.

And yet right now, as they both stood over Dick Grayson's hospital bed, Jason saw suddenly the younger, warmer man who'd once stood beside *his* hospital bed, even as Gotham tore itself apart outside, under the influence of an Apokoliptan news anchor.

*Don't be ridiculous, son—you've never made me anything but proud!*

There was a pain in his chest.

It was one he'd felt a lot, when he'd first come back from the dead. It was almost the only thing he remembered about those first few months, and after his Lazarus bath it had stayed with him, sharper and fainter and sharper again, wrenching, burning with green fire sometimes. It was familiar. Most of the time, it was just another kind of rage. But here and now, it just...wasn't.

*Bet Dick Grayson never screwed up this bad,* he'd muttered that day, with his leg in traction and his arm strapped across his chest.

*Trust me*, Bruce had answered, warm and wry, *he's had his moments*.

Grayson was still breathing under that oxygen mask. Jason had once shot Bruce's ten-year-old son in the left lung.

*I'm sorry I failed you*, he'd said way back then. So ashamed of a little thing like being hospitalized by crazy people. And Bruce had told him not to be ridiculous.

***You've never made me anything but proud.***

"I'm sorry."

It came out as the merest breath of sound, barely louder than Dickiebird's breathing, but Batman heard. Froze.

"What?" he said.

And it was so close to granite. So close to angry, to blank, to *too damn late for that*. But his voice caught, slightly, and that was enough.

Two seconds later and Jason still meant it. He swallowed. "I'm sorry," he said again. On purpose this time.

Slowly the cowl turned. "Jason...?" Batman repeated his name, slow, almost hesitant. Like he thought he might be hearing things.

Bruce had apologized to him before, but it had never mattered. He didn't want apologies. They'd been empty words. They didn't mean anything compared to what Bruce had *done*. The *choices* he'd made. And maybe Jason's apology would be the same way.

*I'm sorry I failed you*, he almost said again, like he had back then. Even knowing that he wouldn't hear back what he wanted to, that Bruce could never tell him again that he'd always been proud. But no, that was something for a thirteen-year-old to say. Jason wasn't a child anymore, and he didn't want to reduce his apology to that. Especially after *that video*, the one that condensed to its essentials meant something like *goodbye, I wish I'd never known you*. He didn't care whether Bruce wanted him anymore, anyway. He was past that, damn it. He'd grown up.

He could be better than this.

"I didn't..." Jason said. Closed his eyes, opened them again to find Dick still unconscious, Bruce watching him. Still as a snake just short of striking. "I woke up angry, and you weren't there," he said, voice perfectly level. Thinking back to that first day out of the Pit, crawling out of the sea, when he'd finally been able to think again, after all those months of nothing but numbness and pain. "And the paper told me you were still playing catch-and-release with the Joker. Like it didn't matter. Nothing had changed." His lips bent in amusement he didn't really feel. "I might as well never have existed. *That* was when I stopped believing in heroes, Bruce. Not when I died. And..."

His right hand tried to move toward the sharp point of hurt near his heart, and he stopped it. He was vulnerable enough here and now, without that. Shifted his feet on the stupidly white flooring instead.

"Jason," Bruce said. "If I could go back and change any of it..."

"What, you'd throw away Replacement? Harsh."

Jason shook his head. He'd given the old man so many last chances. That day in the graveyard, when he'd taken his replacement hostage. That night on the rooftops, when he'd taken the Joker. Hoped so hard there was something he didn't understand that would let him forgive Batman for failing Robin so completely.

"Do you ever ask yourself," he mused aloud, "if it's really me? If dying broke something, or the Pit turned me rabid? Have you asked yourself whether I came back wrong, or if this is who I *always* was, underneath? Or have you always just told yourself you were right all along, right to get rid of me, right that I was *unstable* and *violent* and *broken* from the start?"

He was snarling again, the pain in his chest like a twisting raven's beak, but he kept it quiet, hospital-soft voice, and he kept it almost level. "Let me tell you something, Batman. Sheila Haywood sold me out. Stood there while the Joker beat me down, like it was none of her business. And I *still* tried to save her. It didn't work, but I knew what she did, and I still *tried*. I *died* trying."

He shook his head again, sharply, blinking away a distant long-destroyed warehouse and a locked door and cold red numbers counting down. "And after I woke up and found out about the Joker, I decided to *kill you*." Green Pit-rage fizzing under his skin and the taste of betrayal on his tongue. "I *changed*."

Maybe the Jason he'd been before he died wasn't any more *him* than the ones in those other worlds, than dead Jason, than Bat-Jason. Maybe he'd come back wrong enough that the teenager who'd trained to kill until he became the man called the Red Hood was someone else, someone new, not that earnest, furious brat who'd wanted so much and believed so hard.

"So hold onto him," he said through his teeth. "Your... little soldier, who disobeyed because he cared too much. Give up on me for good if you want, just—" Not him. Not the me I used to think you loved. *Tell me that he made you proud.*

How pathetic was that?

"No," said Batman sharply. "Jason, what you did while I was gone..."

Jason set his teeth. Back to this. Bruce said Jason had never understood, but it was Bruce that didn't get it. Didn't get what really mattered. "The world's never going to get better if you won't go far enough."

Square jaw. No compromise. "It's only going to get worse if we become just like them."



"I'm *not* like them!" Jason spat. Red blood painted across his lips and the red hood on his head. The punchline. *No*. "I'm not him. I'm *me*. And you're wrong. I *saw* the world where you crossed the line, Bruce. I saw. It was better. It was *perfect*. And all it cost was you, and me."

He was pretty sure he had rendered Batman speechless. Drew two heavy, slightly shaky breaths. "I was dead. You were alone, in the dark, with a bunker full of guns. And nobody was afraid anymore, except the ones you always try to scare."

"Nobody stopped me?" Bruce asked, after a heartbeat of time. So quiet. Jason couldn't read his voice. Knew he was thinking of Flash, of Superman, of all his friends who he was fully prepared to stop if they ever went half that far. Who he probably counted on to stop him. Of what could possibly have kept Dickiebird and the other bats from trying to pull him back, back across that line he said he couldn't cross back over. (That world said he might be right, but why did that even *matter*? Batman had put a bullet between the Joker's eyes and started a new phase of his crusade and the world had been practically paradise, up until Monarch invaded and Prime tore it apart.)

(Leslie Thompkins believed in second chances, and thirds and fourths and fifths, because she was a creature of stubborn hope, but Jason was a creature of failure and justice that both tasted equally of blood.)

Jason shrugged. "You killed their enemies. They retired." That was all he knew. He'd told that world's Batman that he'd obviously been dead inside for years, and it had been completely true. All paradise cost was the two of them.

Maybe the bunker had been because Bruce Wayne was on the run, after his ex-friends had revealed him when he wouldn't put down the guns and stop carving the scum right out of the world. Maybe *Alfred* had. Who knew? (*Hey, you...* sang a small insistent voice at the bottom of his mind. *Did you ever realize...?*)

Bruce closed his eyes behind the cowl. Closed his hand on the rail at the end of the bed, but the gauntlet didn't tighten in rage. Jason realized with a shock like cold water that Batman felt like he needed *support*. His own anger shredded between his fingers.

"When did you get so *old*?" he blurted out. He sounded very young in his own ears, and the look Bruce gave him was flat and almost amused.

"A side effect of living," was the dry response. "In my case, though..." he added, more quietly, looking down at his own hand on the bed-frame, tone perfectly unemotional but gesture and word betraying that as a lie, "I must have aged ten years all at once when I lost you."

"...I'm sorry," Jason repeated. He was still angry, had always been angry, might never forgive the man who had once been almost a father to him, but—he *was*. Sorry. Suddenly, today. For screwing up, possibly. For putting so much effort into hurting Bruce and his family, definitely.

Vengeance, he'd always said. Make him pay for what he did to me, for not caring. And on them, for what? For being the ones who mattered? For *not* having died? For thinking

Batman's way worked? What had been the *point* of it?

It wasn't that he'd been totally in the wrong, but. But something.

Batman gave him a strange look. "For dying, Jason? That was never your fault."

And with that, incredibly, he reached up and dragged the cowl back.

Said nothing more for a second; his newly naked eyes lingering on the bird he had just almost lost. Breath under the oxygen mask loud in the quiet room. "I don't want to give up on you," Bruce said, still without looking at Jason. Not looking, but he was talking to him, replying to the challenge he'd made not half a minute ago to finish throwing him away, and Jason could see that unhappy little furrow between his eyebrows that maybe eight people in the world knew existed. "I've never wanted that, Jason." Which didn't mean he wouldn't do it, of course. He was Batman. "Do you really think you've changed that much?"

"I didn't kill Felipe Garzones, you know," stated Jason, rather than answer directly. That raping jackass hiding behind his father's political immunity, who Batman had accused him of pushing off his balcony way back when, and Jason had never denied it until now. "I scared him. I knew he might fall, and I didn't do anything to catch him when he did. But I didn't *plan* it. I didn't *try*. I never did. Back then.

"But planning to kill you, after I came out of the Pit...it was the easiest thing in the world."

And it only got easier. Jason killed people for *fun*, these days. Out of boredom. And sure, he went after scumbags, the worst drug pushers and murderers, but—decapitating people because you were bored—he *didn't* belong in Arkham, dammit. He didn't. He wasn't a murderer, not really. A killer, sure, but not a murderer. And not a monster.

Why was he letting West, or even Leslie, get to him like this? He had made a whole lifestyle of not letting people get to him, or giving a shit what anyone thought. Nightwing, Superman, Batman, Flash, Leslie, Shazam, *Robin*—none of them mattered.

Raised his chin, watched Batman's face. "That bomb under your car. Almost a year after I died. That was me."

Bruce looked at him then, sharply, ice-blue eyes a little wide, like Jason had taken off his mask for the first time all over again. Clearly, Bruce remembered finding that unexploded trap, the bomb that had been slipped in by taking advantage of every tiny weak point in the Batmobile's security, and which could have killed him handily if the trigger had ever been pressed. He'd found it. But he'd never figured out who'd left it, or why they hadn't set it off. It had become an unsolved mystery.

Probably he had believed, until now, that it hadn't been until after years of training with killers that Jason had been ready to go after him. Batman didn't know everything.

*Do you get it, now?*

"But you didn't," Batman stated. His hand on the bed rail tightened.

Jason wouldn't let him pretend that was more than it was. "I wanted you to know it was me who killed you. I wanted to look you in the eye."

*There's this problem bad guys have*, but West was an idiot who'd always had it easy.

Jason didn't care what anyone thought of him.

Bruce looked him in the eye. "And now?"

Jason cared what *Jason* thought.

He sighed. Looked down. "I'm tired, Bruce," he said, and heard the truth of it in his own voice. "And I know now that killing you won't fix anything." Bruce had died, and he'd felt robbed, that he would never have another chance at putting the man in the ground. But he would never be able to go through with it, not now.

Killing Batman wouldn't do anything but make Batman go away, and judging by those stubborn birds, not even that. Jason knew the taste of a hollow victory, and he couldn't pretend he wanted another one.

He was tired; there maybe was the long and short of why he hadn't been able to let Grayson die. Mustering that much rage took so much energy. "And I should never have gone after the kids."

"Tim's not that much younger than you," Bruce pointed out, tone carefully neutral.

Jason shot him a glare. "So, what, you're saying what I did to him was *okay*?"

"No. God, no." Bruce shook his head. More feeling in him now than Jason had seen in years. Since those first days after he came back to Gotham, and stripped back cowl and hood, and they saw each other plain for the first time since Ethiopia.

He thought of the man who'd grabbed both his hands when he woke up, after that shooting Leslie had been reminiscing over, all those years ago. The man who'd clutched them, choked with relief that he'd lived, promising not to ask this of him anymore, emotion spilling carelessly across the sheets. Was there anything in the world that could make Batman that open, now? When Dick woke up, would he look at *him* like that? If Drake or the little Wayne heir survived the same kind of wounds?

Batman's blue eyes flicked past Jason to settle for a second on the far wall. "Tim's so good at suffering without saying a word I think we all forget sometimes that he feels pain. But that doesn't make it alright. It's just..."

He let out a voiceless sigh, and dropped his gaze back to the unconscious Nightwing in his bandages, mottled all pale and purple with bruises. "He's not even thirty yet," he reflected, slipping from talking about one bird to another without fanfare. "He's been a man in his own right...it seems like ages, now. But he's still a boy to me. And he almost died today. Again." Bruce closed his eyes for a second. "What I'm saying, Jason, is that you're still so young. You have a whole life in front of you."

"I'm not even supposed to be alive."

"You should never have been *dead*." Bruce shot a glare across the bed at him, pinned him against the dialysis machine like Jason had just personally affronted him by pointing out the flaw in his feel-good argument. "Don't think of yourself that way. You're a young man, and you are *alive*. Not a ghost, to break apart and vanish when your unfinished business is complete."

"How do you know?" Jason growled, though he'd never till this minute realized he *did* think of himself sometimes as—not a ghost, but a kind of revenant, in the world only to address some wrong. A particular wrong. "I haven't *finished* it."

"Then *don't*."

"Don't say that like it's for my benefit." The pain in Jason's chest twisted, took on a little more of that old comforting burn. "It's just what you want." All he ever seemed to want. For Jason to *stop*. Stop doing, stop being, stop causing problems.

Why was he even here, going over all of this again? To this man, all Jason Todd was now was a mistake. His greatest failure. There was no reason even to talk to the Bat now except to throw that failure in his face. What had he been thinking, asking Bruce not to give up on his second Robin? He'd *done* that, long ago. Even before Jason died. "Just because you don't think I was ever good enough to fight for you doesn't mean I can't handle myself."

Bruce straightened sharply, shoulders pulling back and jaw clenching. Almost pure Batman again, even with the cowl down, but more glowering than glaring now, eyebrows drawing down as though working on a puzzle. "I never said you weren't good enough."

Jason snorted. "Too unstable. Violent. *Damaged*. Should have been locked up with a shrink, not out working on your crusade." He'd said it outright and in a hundred larger ways. *I don't think you ever understood*, he'd said. All those times Bruce had tried to take Robin from him in the old days, that Leslie had almost had him thinking had been about *caring*, not about Jason's failure to meet expectations.

The way Bruce had smiled at him when he'd pulled off something Dick Grayson used to do. The way he'd left Jason alone in the hospital that day after he'd been mauled by the mob, after they argued, to go prove to Jason and the world that Batman was worthwhile. (The way Jason had hobbled after him a few hours later and confronted Godfrey on crutches with an army of little kids.) The way he insisted he was trying to *save* Jason when they fought. The way he threw him away, over and over.

"Guess what, you made your decision a long time ago."

"Yes," Bruce admitted. That furrow between his eyebrows again, concentrating this time rather than sad. "I did. Jason, is this about the message I left...?"

"A-plus to Batman!" Jason snarled. Wished fiercely for his helmet, for any kind of mask. "Did you think you being dead meant I'd *have* to listen to you, or something? 'Cause oh, you definitely took *my* wishes into consideration, when it was me."

He hadn't gotten angry right away, after he'd watched the damn thing. Been too wrung out, maybe. Watching the other Bruce die, the Batman who'd killed for him, had stripped him bare in ways almost nothing else ever had. He'd recovered as best he could, armoured up, but the cracks had still showed, at least from the inside.

And like that, he'd gone to see that video-will almost hopeful, thinking, maybe, that with no more future left to worry about between them, there could be something...settled, some closure, some kind of goodbye after all the times there hadn't been. Bruce had bothered to leave him something, after all. And when it had been so much *nothing*, at first all he'd been able to feel was sad. Hollowed-out.

The rage had clawed up his throat over the next days and weeks, and he would have torn the world apart around him if he'd had the power. Held it by the throat and squeezed and *squeezed*.

If Bruce had walked away alive from that confrontation with Darkseid, Jason might have been ready to make peace with him then. But that video had made a joke of that idea. There was no peace. There would never be peace, not for him. Not even in the grave.

There was a light of incredulity in Batman's eyes. How did he fucking well *dare*?

Jason's hands were shaking. He stilled them. "All the things you could have said," he spat. "All the goodbyes, even all the forms of *apology*, and that was it? *That* was what you wanted to leave me? That was all I was worth?"

"I wanted you to have a future!" Bruce replied. Took a step forward, his hand finally leaving the end of Dickiebird's bed. "That's what I *want* for you, Jason! I want you to live, and I want you to have something worth living for. This—" He made a vague gesture that seemed to encompass all of Jason. "This is going to kill you. *Again*."

"And it's *not* going to kill your birds?" Jason growled. "If it's death you're worried about you should drag your whole freaky little family off the streets and into a headshrinker's. Look at him, right now!" He flung his hand toward Nightwing.

Batman refused to follow the motion, kept his eyes on Jason.

"I have tried a hundred times," he grated out. "With *all* of you. It's one order none of you would ever follow. He left. You ran away." Bruce suspended him, Jason ran away, Jason died. Batman briefly closed his eyes, and the relief of it was staggering. "Better with me than without me. If I can't ground them I can at least watch over them. Stephanie proved that, at least. But I know those are just excuses. Jason, I *know* I should never have brought any of you into this."

"I've told you before," Jason snapped, "that's never been what I hated you for."

"All I meant," Bruce said, strangely earnest in his solemnity, "in that video, was that what happened to you was all my fault."

Jason clenched fists and teeth, and the pain in his chest was like a Batarang slicing toward his heart, dripping acid. "No," he said. "No, it wasn't. I wasn't an adult, sure, but I was a *person*, and I made my own choices, dammit! Always! Since long before I ever hit you with a tire iron and then didn't run fast enough."

He bared his teeth but didn't smile. "If you really believed you should never have let a kid into the field, you wouldn't have had replacements. And if you *really* think I was that worthless, that you should have known all along I'd get myself killed, that I couldn't be trusted to make decisions, that I should have been locked away for my own good a long time ago, come out and say it again, to my face this time, and don't hide behind stupid little lies and...and self-indulgent chest-beating."

"Jason—"

"I *chose*. Give me that. If you really think I'm alive." *And not just a costume in a case and an empty grave.*

"You chose," Bruce acknowledged. "But I should have stopped you."

"Fuck you." What had Dick *thought* would happen, if Jason tried to 'be there' for Bruce? It always came down to fighting, snarled insults and sharp blades and the old man's refusal to compromise, or even listen. It was the same for the Golden Boy, most of the time; how could it possibly go better for him?

"Jason," Bruce said. Tried to catch his eye. "It was *never* about you not being good enough."

"Don't. You've made yourself clear, already. We've made all our choices. I don't *care* about you anymore."

And that might have been the end of it, for now at least, the end of the strange episode that had begun with Jason finding a bleeding bird in a hole. He might have walked out of their lives once again, angry; left the Bat family to circle up around their wounded bluebird and cope by themselves if they lost him, licked his own torn-open wounds back into scars of hate or even indifference, and not seen any of them again for a long time.

But the raw, stricken look that crossed Bruce's face for an instant, just before he could round the end of the bed and stride forward, past the Bat and out the door, stopped him cold. He couldn't have justified it if you'd asked him; he *wanted* to hurt Batman, shouldn't mind walking out on that. His fists shook again, and this time he didn't spare the effort to stop them, just pressed them into his thighs and tipped his head back in frustration.

"Damn it," he said, to a ceiling as blankly white as the walls. "*Damn it*. Don't look at me like that. I *can't* still be disappointing you. You threw me away a long time ago."

Okay, the car-bomb thing is from Red Hood: Lost Days, which emphasized the idea that Jason was a psychopath and it was \*probably\* because of the Lazarus Pit. I grabbed the line about the Pit turning Jason rabid from the animated version of Under the Red Hood, since it hasn't been said in this continuity before, and it's a good line.

Bruce has said or thought pretty much every word I put in his mouth here, in various places in the comics; a lot of it in UtRH, some more recently, a lot of it much longer ago. (One fun time he was visiting Hell and a guilt-eating demon impersonated Jason and drove him into a brief breakdown.) Some of it even to Jason's face, though I don't think any of it really got through. The Felipe Garzones incident was shortly before A Death in the Family, part of the writer's lead-up in hopes of getting him killed; Jason's guilt is canonically ambiguous.

The sequence shortly after Final Crisis where Jason watched the video Bruce left him, and went away sort of wry and sad, was written by a different person than BftC where we found out just what Bruce said. So that initial reaction is tricky to reconcile with Bruce's utter failure to communicate, and the resulting massive spike in Jaybird's insanity. Countdown context helps, but.

Ages are as I've mentioned tricky, because time is broken and the characters aren't allowed to notice. Bruce cannot logically be much less than fifty. I've gone with fifty-two. (Nu52 took a hatchet to the family history to get him back under forty, but Batman can't actually be eternally thirty-five, even if he did manage it for fifty years or so.)

# Fell Away From Me

## Chapter Notes

First of November, as promised. Progress comes incrementally. Like physical therapy. Or...any kind of therapy, I guess.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"Don't. You've made yourself clear, already. We've made all our choices. I don't care about you anymore."*

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*"Damn it," he said to the ceiling. "Damn it. Don't look at me like that. I can't still be disappointing you. You threw me away a long time ago."*

The humming of life support, the labored breathing of a broken bird, the stink of antiseptic and sweat and new plastic and used gunpowder, the dry taste of over-processed air.

"Jason," said Bruce softly. "Son."

Jason dragged a hand across his chest. The acid batarang had settled behind his breastbone and was twisting, sickeningly. "Don't."

It was too late. It had been too late for a long time. Even if *he* ever forgave *them*, after everything he'd done he'd have to come back crawling. And he never would. 'Sorry' was as far as he could ever go.

And he was *no one's* son.

"You weren't a mistake, Jason," Batman continued, still in that nearly-gentle voice from a lifetime ago. "You deserved so much better. I wanted to give you so much. Wanted you to always have reasons to smile."

It would be so easy to get angry again. It was *always* easy to be angry.

Arrogant rich man, 'saving' a poor kid from the streets, 'giving' him a future. Batman always had a tendency to play god.

"But I didn't give you what you needed," Bruce continued. "I've...never been a very good father. And I am *sorry*."



Batman didn't apologize. Everyone knew that, who knew anything about Bats. But he had before, to Jason. When they'd been partners, usually when Jason had gotten hurt. He'd pulled out another of the same when Jason had come for his life—sorry that Jason had been killed. That it was his fault Jason had *died*. Wrong. Too late, anyway. But now he had it almost right. A little of it, almost right. Maybe it helped that he wasn't talking from behind the cowl, maybe...

Jason covered his face, wishing so much for a mask. Even a domino would be better than nothing. "*Damn it, Bruce.*"

Why couldn't he stop himself from listening? He wanted, more than anything, not to want this. Because it wasn't something he could have. Not really.

"Don't," he repeated, calmer. "You can't get me back. I'm not the kid you lost. Just—make your peace with him, and maybe we can stop fighting."

Maybe. When he looked at Dick and realized he couldn't make himself tear that catheter out of his neck, he almost believed it, but when he looked back at Batman and his bare-faced failure to ever, *ever* understand, everything hurt and he remembered that peace was a lie.

If Jason was going to be so honest with himself tonight, here was an admission: if he'd been able to *really* not care, he would have walked away and started ignoring Batman a long time ago. After the first failure, when he nearly bled out from a Batarang to the throat. Or even sooner. Hate was still a form of investment, and letting Dick and Leslie trick him into nostalgia for an older, warmer form wasn't making it easier to laugh and turn his back again. And walk away.

*Walk away, Jason*, he thought, and his feet wouldn't move.

Bruce had been the best of Jason's parents, probably. Willis had not been nearly as hard, in some ways, but he had also been much less warm, and even more absent, even while still alive. Catherine had needed him to take care of her as much as the reverse, especially toward the end; she'd given up on him and life alike. And Sheila had treated him like so much trash. Bruce had demanded a lot, and been too busy for him a lot of the time, and put his life in danger just as often as the others, but—

Jason had wanted his approval so much, and been so afraid to care at all, and—

"I don't like fighting you," Bruce admitted. And he wasn't the man who used to call Jason *Jay* and *lad* and *son* and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder, any more than Jason was the kid who'd joked his way through fight after fight.

But he was trying.

"If you don't think it was my fault I died," Jason said, not quite looking at Batman, "why did you teach the replacements to think it was?"

Bruce sighed. "I was using your memory," he confessed, frankly, with that shameless blandness that he always used to indicate that a thing had been *necessary*. "Death is an

abstract. You made it concrete. I hoped it would keep them careful."

"Because I was careless."

"Reckless, sometimes," Bruce agreed, expressionless. "Overconfident. You were never afraid enough, but it was becoming more of a problem. I was concerned...." He paused, looking over at the supine form of his oldest. "Very concerned," he reiterated. "Terrified," he amended. "That I would lose you. That was why I stood you down."

"Well, that worked out great. Good job." Jason was scathing, even though he wasn't sure, himself, what Bruce should have done differently. Talked to him more, obviously, but that probably wouldn't have changed a thing. Locked him up for his own good? Please.

Bruce winced, a little. "I'm sorry."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Don't waste your apologies on that, already. Didn't you only get issued like forty to last your whole life?" He waved it all away. "You wanted me different. I wasn't, and I'm not. It is how it is." Bruce had never spent this long *looking* at him, not since training him, not unless Jason tried to kill someone and grandstanded and *made* him look. He wanted it to stop.

It was *going* to stop, even if he didn't want it to. He wasn't one of them, and Bruce was not his father, and he was a grown man who didn't need one. They'd forget him again as soon as he was out of sight.

He shot a cursory glare across the foot of the bed. "I'm done," he announced. "I don't owe you anything. Take better care of your birdies, before you lose another one." He finally rounded the sickbed and made for the door with that, not caring that he had to nearly brush against Batman to get there. If the man wanted to lash out and pick a fight, Jason was *so* there.

"I was always proud, you know."

The tone was quiet, matter-of-fact, coming from just behind his left shoulder, and Jason gritted his teeth and kept walking.

"Don't lie to me, Batman."

"It's not a lie. You were brave, and you never let anything hold you back, and you cared. So much."

Jason stopped. The twisting in his chest wasn't a real injury, he *knew* that, but it felt the same. "Shut up."

"You were strong for me when I was...damaged." In the aftermath of Deacon Blackfire's brainwashing, he meant, when Batman had been a shell of himself, terrified, confused, broken. Jason had combed the city for him the whole time he was missing, laughed at death and kept pushing them both forward until Bruce pulled himself back together, and they had kicked some insane cult ass and put it all behind them. Neither of them had ever mentioned it

again, until now. (*It's been fun, Batman*, he'd said, when he thought it was the end. *At least we're going out in style. Alright, you sorry clowns. Let's party!*)

"I haven't forgotten that," Batman said.

(His real last words, a few months later, had been *What's wrong?* Batman hadn't *forgotten* that, either, because he hadn't been there to hear.)

Jason snorted. "You threw me in Arkham to *rot*."

"I didn't."

It was true, actually; Dick had. Dick Never-give-up-except-when-you-do Grayson. But Bruce would have done the same, given the chance, and he hadn't done anything about it afterward but stop by once to *threaten* Jason, once he came back from the dead. Though he'd been in Blackgate, by then. Not Arkham.

Jason turned around, finally, so he could fix Bruce with a disgusted look. "Do you have some kind of delusion they actually help people there?"

He'd gotten himself moved to the normal prison very easily, proved himself perfectly sane, just violent and abnormally socialized. They'd changed their minds when he poisoned the whole cafeteria. Shame. But he'd gotten his break on the way back, shitty animal-face mercenaries, and he was *never* going back to Arkham. Never. The only saving grace of the place was that they hadn't trusted him to interact with the other inmates, so he hadn't had to come face-to-face with the Joker. Just listen to him laughing at night.

Bruce's mouth pulled sideways in a complicated, torn expression, and Jason's lip curled. "You do, don't you? What, you think they have any shrinks you can trust an inch, that I'd just sit down and start spilling my guts, and somehow wind up *okay*? You'd be in trouble if I *did*; it's not like I could get through my issues without outing you like five thousand times over."

He'd thought about it, actually—not telling any of Arkham's shitty staff all his private feelings, of course, but pretending to go along with the 'asylum' idea just enough to ruin Batman and Robin.

He hadn't, for the same reason he'd only confirmed Bruce's name to Hush, who already suspected and hated him, not spilled it all across Gotham; the same reason Hush hadn't told any of his pawns. Knowing was his trump, something to hold over their heads and use to strike at them, and every additional person who learned the secret weakened the importance of his knowledge. If they were forced to give up their civilian identities altogether, that would just ruin the game.

"Thank you for that," Bruce said, rather stiffly.

"Heh. Believe me, I didn't hold back as a favor. I just don't want strangers in our business."

Revealing Dickie and his little songbird in the altogether on webcam would have been a mocking, ridiculous masterstroke, would have been *him* exposing them, shattering the long

charade. *That* was a kind of victory. Sneaking the truth out via some Arkham flunky so the world could nibble them apart was admitting defeat, even if it *worked*. It was submitting to being trapped in Arkham and unable to bring them down himself.

Jason was not really into submitting to anything. Ever.

Bruce sighed; a voiceless, frustrated rush of air out his nose with his mouth pressed tight. "This vendetta of yours," he said. "Is it never going to be over?"

Jason scowled. "Give me one reason to stop."

"You saved Nightwing."

"That's not a reason."

"I was hoping you had a reason for saving him."

Jason shrugged. "Nope. Spur-of-the-moment thing."

"You made a choice. I have to think that means something."

"Oh, you want to talk about choices, Batman? You want me to choose you?" Jason watched Bruce, couldn't tell what he was thinking. "When have you ever chosen me?"

He'd chosen him off the street, sure, but that was more about empty nest syndrome than Jason.

That night on the roofs, when Bludhaven had died to fucking Slade Wilson and his stupid Society ties, and upstaged Jason's careful preparations. When Dickiebird had suddenly needed him.

And then Bruce had *chosen*, and Jason must have been hoping a little, even after all his years of anger, that Bruce would prove Jason Todd meant more than an empty grave, because it had hurt. He'd dared Batman to kill him if he wanted to save the Joker, since keeping the Joker alive was killing people *anyway*, just less directly, so Batman might as well be *honest* about it.

He'd dared him, but he hadn't really expected him to try. Wanted to see him helpless, mostly. Batman, unwilling to fire a gun, losing against the Red Hood who would.

When he'd fallen, bleeding, with the Joker's laugh ringing in his ears...that was when Batman had killed Jason Todd.

There was no going back from that, and he bared his teeth.

"You cut my throat to save the fucking *Joker*."

Bruce's face could have been made of stone. "You tried to make me kill."

Jason wasn't going to let him rewrite the past. "No, I tried to make you let *me* kill that piece of crap. I already knew how little I was worth to you, and you've gone on and proved it over and over, you self-satisfied, hypocritical old fuck." He had his hand on a knife now, one whose edge he'd honed to a razor just hours ago. He knew where a blade could most easily sink into Batman's side and earn him a bed right down the hall.

Air rushed through Batman's teeth. "You were worth *plenty*. Why do you have to demand the one thing I can never give anyone?"

Jason's breath came short and sharp, and it was vastly insufficient comfort that the hurt around his heart was mirrored in blue eyes across the blank little room. "You'd do it for him," he snarled, the smallest of sharp gestures toward the bed to show who he meant by 'him.'

Batman loved his Golden Bird more than anything in the world, after all.

"No." That certainty he hated so much. "And he wouldn't *want* me to."

"Because you always do what people want." Jason snorted.

"You know I don't. Jason..." Bruce watched him. "It's easy, isn't it? Your way."

"I don't kill people just because I'm a lazy ass, if that's what you mean," said Jason, because he knew better than to answer *yes*. It was *so* easy. It felt so clean and straightforward and he didn't feel the slightest hesitation pulling a trigger and watching blood and brains fly, anymore.

*It's too damn easy*, Bruce had said, years ago, now, on that building Jason had rigged to blow. Jason had heard the words, remembered them, but he didn't think he'd really believed them until he'd seen Earth-51, and the Batman with a gun in his hand who was dead inside.

Which was stupid because he should have believed it much earlier. That same night, when he fell.

"You *cut my throat*," he repeated, and raised his eyes to Batman's. He'd...never really absorbed that, maybe. Bruce had talked so much about how much he couldn't go along with killing in any form that it had obscured the hard-edged fact of that death blow. The memory was a little blurred, but Jason knew he wasn't making things up. It had happened.

The *shuck* of a blade through the side of his neck, pain following a little behind, just where the cute little jugular port went into Nightwing right now, and if Jason was still standing over there he probably *would* rip it out, and enjoy the gush of a heart busily killing itself because all it knows is how to pump until it stutters still.

They'd get Grayson treatment really fast, of course, being in a hospital, even if Jason turned the room into a war zone for a little while to stall, but losing more blood couldn't do his struggling system any good. Maybe he'd die, and Jason could pretend none of the stupid little fussiness of today had ever happened, that he'd stood by and watched Nightwing die in a hole and never tried to be better than the villain they all told him he was.

They should all be used to being stabbed in the back, by now.

"Jason..." said Bruce, like this was something small, to gentle him out of, like he needed calming down. Like Bruce had any right to calm him.

Jason shook his head. Didn't he get it? "You *killed* me. You probably intended to patch me up or something, before I could bleed out, but you didn't get the chance, did you? You didn't do anything to control the Joker after you got my gun away from his head, and I felt the bombs go off as I blacked out, and I didn't expect to wake up." He paused. "I still don't know why I did."

At least he'd only had to dig his way out of rubble, that time, not a coffin, because Bruce hadn't even bothered to recover his body.

He sneered. "So, if I *hadn't* come back again, made you notice I existed with blood on the ground, would you ever have faced that, Batman? That you *murdered* me to protect your archenemy? Did that even *bother* you? You're the one who says I'm alive, here. So why was it okay to kill me and not him?"

Jason had seen Batman broken before. Maybe more often than anyone, though of course he couldn't be sure—Alfred and Dickiebird and probably the damn *clown* had had plenty of opportunity to exceed his score. Barbara too, maybe. Replacement, even.

He was the only one who knew it from both sides, though, carrying Batman broken till he mended and breaking him in his turn, but even he had rarely looked him in the eye as it happened. The cowl hid so much when it was up, but neither of them had masks to hide behind now.

"I didn't..." Bruce said, and it was that small voice, the one you almost never heard, the one he'd used to say *please don't* a few seconds before he cut Jason's throat, the one he'd used after the cult, the one Jason once heard him use in his sleep against some nightmare he couldn't fight.

Jason had no pity left for it.

"You *did*, you sack of shit. You killed me. And you walked away from it, probably thinking more about precious Grayson's ruined city than my corpse. I knew I didn't matter, but...fuck, I thought I at least counted as human."

There were no tears. He wouldn't let there be tears. Never again. The last time he'd cried over this man had been in a hotel room in Malaysia, when he'd tacked the surveillance photos of the new Robin to the wall, and looked his replacement in the smiling face, and understood that there was no going back, not ever. That everything had been a lie.

Bruce shifted, the cape flaring and falling. "Of course you're human, Jay."

"*Don't fucking call me that.*"

He'd had a long argument with Dick, once, when he was fourteen, about zombies, and what they symbolized. He'd just fought actual zombies at the time, and was pretty sure *that* bunch just symbolized that witches were bitches, but mostly they'd stuck to fiction, where it was clear that things *meant* things, instead of just existing—commercial whore zombies and absolutist government drone zombies and apathy zombies and despair zombies and hunger zombies and betrayal zombies and zombies that stood for the fear of losing yourself.

Jason had gotten really angry by the end, which was why he remembered it as an argument, and hadn't been all that sure why, but *that* was why. Hunger zombies were simple, straightforward, easier than living people because you could just destroy them when they came at you, and that was how he'd dealt with the animated corpses the evil neopagan had sicced on him and Batman, but apathy zombies? Despair zombies? Loss-of-self zombies?

He'd punched Dick at some point after one of them had said something about drugs, and then Dick had acted all understanding and been so not-a-dick about it Jason had just wanted to hit him over and over. But he knew he'd lose, and then Bruce would expect an explanation, so he'd gone off alone to sulk.

Being a zombie would be a nice excuse. No one expected zombies to be anything more than monsters.

It would be a good excuse for Bruce, too. Everyone knew you didn't owe a zombie anything but a bullet to the forehead. Double tap.

(Superheroes probably couldn't joke about zombies anymore, not after the thing with the rings, and Jason really must have been too insignificant to bother with or something, right? Because he'd crawled out of his own coffin eight years ago, and how was that *not* Nekron's line of business?)

"I panicked," said Batman suddenly, into the silence Jason hadn't even realized he'd left. Not that weak little voice anymore, and not the obscenely kind one, but not one of the strong, commanding, confident ones either. He wasn't sure he'd ever heard Bruce's voice like this before. "I know you think I'm a hypocrite, but I'm not so bad that I'd think it made any difference whether I killed with a blade or a gun. I didn't want to hurt you, *God*..." Bruce trailed off for a second, and there were so many things Jason could say, leap down Batman's throat and tear him apart while he was vulnerable, but he held off. He wanted to hear this.

"I didn't want to hurt you," Bruce repeated. "But it was down to the last second that all three of us were still alive, and...it takes more than seconds to bleed out from where I cut you, so that was another few minutes to change the game. A few minutes might as well have been eternity. It seemed worthwhile.

"I...underestimated the Joker, because I wasn't thinking about the Joker. I'd almost forgotten he was there. I was only thinking about you."

And he shouldn't drink that last sentence up. That was sick, wanting to hear that even now, and why did he even believe it?

Except he'd never denied that Batman was epic, amazing, brilliant—blind as his namesake half the time, but not stupid, and that was stupid, that was so, *so* stupid, ignoring the Joker like that, that maybe panic was the right answer.

He shook his head. "Why did it matter enough to panic?" Because yeah, putting a gun in Batman's hands and telling him to shoot Jason if he wanted to save the clown, that was meant to mess with his head; the whole setup was to mess with his head, but why *panic*? "You'd already watched me kill the Nazi. I'd left a trail of corpses across your city. It wasn't like I had any innocence left to protect."

"If I didn't try," said Bruce. "Even if it was him—*especially* because it was him, someone I wanted dead—I'd be just as responsible. You set it up that way. To make me kill the Joker by proxy. It would have been like using you as a murder weapon. And you're worth more than that."

Don't let him distract you. It wasn't about you, just him. Just his stupid *line*, and his need to always, always win. "You...are seriously fucked up," Jason stated, not moving his eyes from Bruce's face.

An eyebrow twitched in what might have been acknowledgment.

"Why does it matter?" Jason asked him again, the way he had on that roof. There was no hostage now, nothing to panic over, though he could turn Nightwing into a hostage in six long strides if he needed to. "If you killed just once, why would it matter so *much*?"

"Because it could never *be* once. Jason." Bruce took a step toward him, away from the bed, for the first time. "If it was something I was willing to do, ever, then what justification would I have for *not* doing it? Whenever it seemed to come down to a choice between two lives, and they weren't equally innocent, how could I justify risking one, trying to save both? Why would I *not* resolve every hostage situation by killing the hostage-taker?"

"I don't answer to anyone. If I ever accept that some lives are to be thrown away, I won't be able to turn back from that decision."

"And what's so wrong with that?" Jason demanded. "I don't—it would break you, I get that, I'm not asking you to take my road; I get now that it isn't for you, but besides what it did to you, why is it so wrong? If it was someone else, instead? It made things better. In the world where you did it. For everyone else, things were *better*."

Bruce drew a breath, but his eyes were clear. "Because it *didn't* cost just you and me, whatever world it made. It cost everyone I killed. I don't know who they were, but they weren't all the Joker, and they were all dead.

"And there is no one in any world whose judgment I trust enough to risk the chance that any *one* of those people *didn't* deserve to die. I will *never* have the right to judge who deserves to live. And if I ever take even one innocent life, then it would be better if I had never existed."

*Better for him that a millstone be hung about his neck and he should be cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to be lost,* intoned the voice of the priest his mom



had dragged Jason to some Sundays, when she was feeling particularly guilty, like repenting your sins meant anything if you just went back and sinned the same way all over again.

"You're such an absolutist," Jason shook his head, threw back his shoulders to better embrace his disgust. "Tch. This is what I *meant*, about antiquated morality. You really wouldn't sacrifice one person for the world? *Really?* You'll lie and manipulate and break the people who love you into gibbering shards of human beings, but you won't let the most worthless slug of a human being die? Just to avoid the burden of the *choice*? What the hell kind of standard is that?"

Batman shook his head, too. Not so much the 'you've never understood' from the last time they'd argued this, though that was there too, as like he'd run out of words; he'd given Jason more words today than ever before, more than he knew what to do with, and it still wasn't working. Wasn't enough.

"I did look for you," he said instead, after long seconds of the kind of strangled silence that Jason would have broken with a gunshot if Warden Rourdan hadn't impounded all his guns except the one Flash stole.

Before Jason could figure that declaration out, Bruce went on, "after that explosion. I should have been in Bludhaven, but I stayed to look. And I came back, later, to keep looking. Eventually I decided that since I couldn't find your body, you were probably still alive."

"You needed to believe that," stated Jason, and Batman lowered his head in acknowledgement.

"I can't afford to break down," he said, and Jason hated him so much.

"You don't really care, do you?" he demanded. "Oracle wasn't talking to you, neither was Drake, you'd gotten a shittily trained gutter-Robin killed *again*, your city was a mess, the city next door was murdered, and you killed me. And none of that stopped you. You don't give a fuck about anyone, do you? It's just the goddamned *mission*."

"Luthor Junior and Prime launched their Infinity Tower project," said Batman. "Billions died. Trillions more were at risk." He paused. "You said it yourself. I never stop."

"Yeah, so what's your secret? Not drugs, obviously, you tried that way back when and it didn't work out." To add to Batman's accomplishments was that at a little older than Jason was now, he had become possibly the only person ever to survive quitting Venom cold-turkey.

(This was as much a feat of stupidity as sheer willpower, of course, since reasonable people didn't put themselves through almost-certainly-fatal sudden withdrawal, when steadily stepping down the dosage to ease your body out of dependency was a much more survivable option, but it was Batman's patented brand of stupidity, the need to do everything absolutely, nothing halfway, to prove his control to himself over and over and over.)

"I do what I have to do."

"Is that it?" Jason half laughed, because there had to be more to it, something beyond the obvious, something besides forcing himself back onto his feet, something besides just strength.

Bruce shrugged a little, face closed. "How do you do it?"

How did he...? "Hate," said Jason, and it was only part of the real answer, but it made Batman flinch, made him close his eyes and turn his head away, like he couldn't stand to look at him.

Jason smirked, and finally took his hand off the knife in his pocket. "You're not the good guy," he said. "I'm not the villain. That's not how this works."

Bruce sighed. "Some things are simple," he disagreed. "The Joker deserves to die. But I can't do it."

Not because it was hard, he'd said. Because it would be easy.

"When I tracked him to the UN after your funeral, Superman was there, more worried about making sure I didn't beat the clown to death than about foiling his plots, and I broke my hand on his face." Bruce's mouth bent a little, inviting Jason to laugh at him, but no laughter came. He stood stone still, waiting for the rest of the story, and the shadow of a smile dropped away.

"In the end, he wasn't there to stop me," said Batman. "While Superman was dealing with a gas attack, I caught up to the Joker on his escape helicopter. His minions were incompetent. The copter crashed. We couldn't find a body." He paused. "I don't know if I would have killed him or not. I know I've never come closer."

Bruce's eyes bit suddenly, maybe angry, maybe not, but so fierce Jason couldn't *not* meet them, for just a second, and then couldn't hold them longer than that second. "I know what you want from me. I will always say no. But you have to understand, Jason. While you're listening. It has *never* been because I didn't care."

And the hell of it was, Jason thought he believed that. After all, he'd always cared, too, no matter how much he tried not to.

*I know where I'm needed*, he'd told Donna, and turned his back on her to fight beside a Batman he'd only just met for a world he didn't give a damn about.

Give up on me, he wanted to say again, not an offer this time but a petition. Give up on me because if you don't I don't think I can ever give up on you, but that doesn't stop me from hating you more than anything.

When that other Batman died, the killer was too strong for me, and someone else got him, so I killed the nearest Joker. And it helped.

It helped.

Give up on me, Bruce. *Please*.

"You think that matters?" he asked at last. Couldn't put the conviction he wanted into his scorn.

"I think..." Bruce paused. Too long, even for Batman hoping to be interrupted and spared answering a difficult question. "I hope it does," he concluded at last.

Jason couldn't read his face. He huffed, and scrubbed one hand across his own.

It mattered. Of course it mattered.

It mattered as much as the fact that Bruce was acting like a dad, acting like a person, *trying*, even if that was just because almost losing another bird had made him sentimental, because he didn't have anything better to do in this blank, blank room.

"Back then," he said, watching the man who'd failed him so completely. "When I died. I thought..." What had he thought? It was hard to remember, sometimes, to separate all the times he'd relived the nightmare from the first reality of it. All the thoughts he remembered were real, but some of them, he wasn't sure which Jason they belonged to. The living or the dead.

Sometimes he wasn't completely sure which of those meant him.

This time it was him who'd left such a silence the walls seemed to bend inward. He heard Bruce take a small breath.

"Were you frightened, Jay?"

For a second Jason was thirteen again, and he admired this man from the bottom of his heart and would have changed so much more than his hair color to be allowed to fight at his side. Then he was grown, with hair like poorly-trimmed fire and the smell of gunsmoke seeped deep in his coat. He chuckled. Raked the hair back from his forehead and looked up, still laughing. "Are you kiddin', Bruce?" he said.

And, incredibly, saw in Bruce's face that he remembered, too, just as clearly, that long-ago dawn Leslie had reminded Jason of earlier tonight, when Batman had held both his hands and tried to tell him he didn't have to do something as dangerous as being Robin anymore.

Jason had snorted at him. *Are you kiddin', Bruce?* he'd chuckled then as the sun rose. *We've got work to do!*

And Jason laughed now, almost loud enough to be worried he'd wake up Nightwing, drugs or not. "Of course I was scared." He shook his head. This much was easy to be sure about. "I'd been mostly dead plenty of times already, so I *knew* what it felt like, all the broken bones and split-open organs, all the blood, my vision won't quite focus, and there's the bomb counting down and I'm way too messed up to have a prayer of stopping it. Sure I was scared. What do you think I was, a moron?"

A careless roll of his shoulders. Like this wasn't his *death* he was talking about. "But there was someone to save, so I focused on that. And it turns out the door was locked anyway, so if

I'd left her tied up, it wouldn't have helped me any."

"Sheila outlived you by a few minutes. She told me you tried to shield her from the blast."

"It's what I was." He gave Batman a funny look. "You were there that fast?"

Bruce swallowed. "You were still warm."

That had more likely been the heat of the explosion that had seared his flesh than the lingering warmth of life, but that it hadn't faded yet... Jason felt a little weak, was glad he was in the middle of the room with nothing in reach or he might have tried to steady himself the way Batman had earlier against the bed, and given too much away. "That close," he muttered. He'd come that close to surviving. To having a completely different life.

"I'm sorry." It was just the two words, but they sounded real, hoarse, offered up in place of consolation.

Jason scoffed. "Oh, shut *up*."

Bruce paused. "You don't want me to apologize for letting you down at—the end," he said, not quite cautiously, as though he was feeling his way along an idea, trying to work out what he *should* do if it wasn't apologize.

Jason jerked a shoulder. He'd told Bruce years ago he forgave him for not saving him. Wasn't Jason's fault he couldn't seem to listen through the guilt. "Look, you didn't get back in time. That sucks, but it's not like you promised to be back before you were. I screwed up more than you did; between the two of us, it was my *fault*. Not being sorry would have been shitty of you, yeah, but...either get over it or don't. It happened. It's not the worst mistake you've ever made."

Bruce squared his jaw; his eyebrows seemed to contradict Jason with *yes it damn well was*. "I should have been there."

"Okay, yeah, you should have." Jason contorted his face, trying to figure out how to say this, why he was even bothering to try. Bruce had a share of the blame, definitely, and he'd never especially tried to lighten it because he liked to see the man torturing himself, but right now it was pissing him off too much to put up with anymore, that blind, arrogant guilt, and the torturing wasn't as fun as usual, either. "Just...you need to get that I wasn't trusting you to save me."

Bruce's face went blank at that, blanker than Batman, blanker than anything, and Jason corrected himself in an embarrassing rush, "I don't mean I didn't *trust* you." He'd trusted Bruce more than he'd ever trusted anyone. Jason-then trusted Bruce more than *anyone* did, now. "I don't mean I wasn't *hoping* you'd get there in time, either, because who wants to die? It's..." He had it. "I knew how to take care of myself. I'd been doing it for a long time. I didn't need someone for that. It was good to have you watching my back, sure, but I was never with you for *protection*."

"It's a parent's place to protect," Bruce bit out.

*There is nothing worse than not being able to protect your children,* Flash had said, thrumming with obnoxious certainty. *Than knowing it.*

Scarlet—mad, bitter Sasha with her ruined face—hadn't even slightly been his, and he'd still have shot himself in the head rather than be the reason she got hurt. He'd tried to die for her, against Flamingo. She hadn't listened. Hadn't let him.

*I wanted to prove that you never have to worry about me,* had been some of the first words he ever spoke as Robin, in his stolen costume and freshly dyed hair, before Bruce had even given him permission to use the name. Maybe it wasn't Jason's own failures that had stopped Bruce from accepting *anything* as that proof. Maybe nothing would have been good enough.

He flung his hands open, his breath coming strangely easy. "Fine. Maybe protecting me wasn't the hugest insult, even if you were a massive bastard about it. But that still wasn't what I was on the team for."

"What was it, then?" Bruce had that pale, intent look he usually got when chasing down the last clue in a big case. "What did you *want*, Jason?"

Jason knew the sound of a mantra in Batman's voice. *Gotham is mine. The mission comes first. A cowardly, superstitious lot. We **do not** kill.*

This was it. This was that sound. *What did you want?* How many times had he asked Jason's ghost, in those years that Jason spent plotting to come home and murder him? To give it that cadence, that sound of ritual. How many times since he'd found out Jason was alive and hating him?

His mouth opened on no words at all. *Training*, he could have said, and it wouldn't be a lie. *Opportunities, a comfortable place to live, a chance to kick some heads and even the odds for everybody still out there getting ground down. Lemonade and ice cream and chili dogs and all the books I could pile up.* It was true; he'd wanted all those things, then. But he *got* them. Even if Robin wasn't allowed to go as far as necessary in the name of cleaning the streets up, he'd had all of that.

What Bruce was asking, what he had been asking for years, was *what did you want, that I didn't give?*

He knew. He knew where he failed. That he didn't know *how* still made Jason angry; it was like the thing in his chest had come alive and started gnawing itself a den; the rage shook his hands again. (It was just anger, the shaking. Just anger.) Bruce didn't understand. But he was asking. He'd *been* asking. Jason hadn't been there to hear, let alone answer, but Bruce had asked.

*Why didn't you listen? Why did you leave? Why didn't you come back? What did I do wrong?*

And still there were no words.

"You stupid old man," he said, hoarsely, after a long, buzzing silence. "What do any of us want?"

## Chapter End Notes

Not so many new sources this time. Caveat that Jason isn't actually confirmed crying in the place in 'Lost Days' where he waits until he's alone to melt down about Tim, but it looked like crying to \*me.\*

The reference to 'one of the first things Jason ever said as Robin' is pre-Crisis canon; putting the red hair back into continuity made other parts of that origin fair game so far as I'm concerned. I never liked the retcon where Bruce picked him up with the overt goal of training him into a sidekick, anyway. Talk about child endangerment issues.

Bruce did look, and then have that whole site excavated, trying to find Jason's crushed and exsanguinated corpse, per canon, but Jason is unaware because he somehow \*got up and walked away\*. He and the Joker now share superpowers, apparently.

# Leading the Blind

## Chapter Notes

We're back!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"What was it, then?" Bruce had that pale, intent look he usually got when chasing down the last clue in a big case. "What did you **want**, Jason?"*

*"You stupid old man," he said, hoarsely, after a long, buzzing silence. "What do any of us want?"*

Batman's eyes narrowed, at the question, as though Riddler had given him a more difficult puzzle than usual. Flickered from Jason, to the bed with its slumbering patient, and away through the wall to gaze north, toward Wayne Manor where the little birdies should still be sleeping. And then in another direction, and Jason couldn't read that; had no idea if Bruce was contemplating his Batgirls, wherever they were, or something else entirely.

He watched the man press his lips together, the openness that had come into his face with confusion draining away, and wondered all over again why he hadn't left yet.

"It shouldn't be a competition," Bruce said quietly, after another silent breath. Leslie would have pointed out that *he* was an only child.

Jason snorted. Way to skip past the point. Hopeless failure, do not pass go, do not collect 200 batpoints. "It isn't. First place is pretty perpetually occupied. Even your little demon knows that."

Of all the reasons he had to hate Dick Grayson, first and foremost would always be that old certainty that the most he was ever expected to do was *measure up*. No one had ever thought he could be better. Even when Batman had been the angriest and most disparaging of Nightwing, even when Jason had visited him in Bludhaven and Dick had been defensive and resentful and so obviously sick to death of Bruce's judgment... Grayson was the best, and everyone knew it. There was no empty slot there to claim, and there never had been.

No more trying to be almost-as-good for him, though. No more proving himself *to* Batman, who'd never be satisfied. These days, the only standards Jason was trying to live up to were his own.

Bruce sighed. "None of you have ever been replaceable."

"Hasn't stopped you from trying."

Bruce scowled. "I was never trying," he disagreed. Took a step forward, closing the space between them, Jason trapped against the door. "He left a space you stepped into, yes, a role, but you were...yourself. You belonged, in your own right."

Jason narrowed his eyes. "A space, yeah. You could have filled it with any spare, vaguely talented kid."

"If I had been *looking* for a new Robin, I would have conducted research on a number of candidates," Bruce retorted, cutting suddenly, softness all gone. "There would have been system and intent. You weren't even intended to end up in the field."

"So it was a *whim*?" Jason snarled, finding he hated that idea even more than having been selected as a nearly-adequate Grayson substitute.

"It was a *choice*," snapped the man standing furiously upright between him and the bed, ignoring the possibility of a chair, as if he *hadn't* just exhausted himself fighting a minor war. "It was a boy who was brave and bright and angry, who I didn't want to leave where I found him. Who I couldn't stand to see again in five or ten years, stealing something less replaceable than tires."

Jason jerked back as if *he* was the one who'd been stabbed, this time, his stomach falling away. "So *that's* all I am," he spat. He'd known it. He'd *known* it. "That's the failure, isn't it? Worse than killing me, you wanted to take a killer off the streets, and instead you put a better one on."

Bruce's face was set in a mask of unhappiness. "You always had so much potential, Jason."

"Is that what you saw?" he snarled. "*Potential*, like...like *clay*? To shape into a new bird or leave to be battered into a murderer? Do you think *this* was destiny?" he demanded, jabbing a thumb into his own chest, "or just your failure as a sculptor?"

There was something like a sob in that last furious question, and Jason wanted to stab his own stupid hopeful heart on a pike and leave it out for the crows. Hated the sound of it pounding in his ears. *The red blood, the red hood, the—did you ever **realize** what you'd—* "God, Bruce, did you look at me and see nothing but either a knockoff bird or the fucking *Joker* staring back out of the future?"

"I saw *myself*," Bruce growled.

There was a shocked silence. Neither of the two men standing breathed, and Jason had to strain his ears to be sure that Grayson still did.

Then Batman's stance settled, and he held Jason's eyes with his steely-blue ones. Committed. "Myself," he repeated, more softly. "All that anger you had, Jason, anger at what you'd lost and what you'd never been given, at what people did to hurt each other, at injustice and how little you could do to change any of it." He paused; seemed about to stop there, then firmed his mouth into that familiar grim slash and pressed on.



Holding his heart out in his hand, like a rank amateur who'd never had it thrown to the ground and stomped on. This was Batman?

Well, no. This was Bruce. But even then.

"I was among the most fortunate of orphans, I know," Bruce Wayne stated mildly. "I had everything I could need, and a responsible caretaker. But I put away childish things early, and damaged myself with directionless rage for too many years. You...were strong in a way very few people are, and you'd *earned* that strength, but no one is strong enough to take on the whole uncaring world with no resources and no help.

"I wanted to take you home and make sure you had a childhood. Had bright days to put away against the future, had everything you needed to grow up into the man I could see in you. I *wanted* for you to be happy, Jason."

Incredibly, terrifyingly, there was a brightness in Batman's eyes like tears, and a crack lurking in his voice as he said, ever so quietly, "I wanted you to be better than me."

*I am*, should be the witty, bitter answer, the gauntlet to the face of this empty sentiment. That was the whole point, after all; Red Hood could do what Batman couldn't, could make a permanent difference, was what Batman should always have been. The fear in the dark. Jason was the *best*.

But it wouldn't come past his lips, and Jason strangled on it, drew in a sharp breath before it suffocated him, and at last let out a quiet laugh. "You got all of that out of me boosting your tires and hitting you with the tire iron?" he said, jocular and incredulous and still half-choked.

Bruce didn't smile in response, but some of the tension in his face eased in an almost friendly way. "Sheila was right about one thing," he said, and Jason didn't want to think about Sheila Haywood. "You were better than either of us deserved."

The choking feeling cut off all Jason's air, and he wanted to kill Batman, kill the woman he'd died protecting, kill that other, that original Jason Todd that Bruce had maybe, actually cared about, and his own ghost, and— "Jason," said that worried, lying voice from the other side of his eyelids, though he wasn't sure when they'd come down.

"Shut up!" he shouted, and threw the first thing he could lay hands on at Batman's face.

The Bat dodged. Automatically, instinctively, and then in the next heartbeat plucked the missile from the air before it could smash into the medical equipment on the far side of the bed. It was the stupid, useless piece of obsolete crap Grayson had loaned him to stay in contact with the League, still flaking blood.

Batman ran a thumb over the stained buttons, and then looked back at Jason. He was breathing again, his chest heaving huge shuddering breaths to make up for the long suffocating seconds before he'd shattered thick air the only way he knew how. Bruce's expression was very, insultingly calm, as he moved along the side of the bed and set the comm on Grayson's empty nightstand.

"So when I say I'm sorry, that's what I mean," came his voice again, as though Jason hadn't told him to be quiet, calm and even and not quite emotionless. "I went wrong somewhere. I let you down. I was never a good father," he repeated.

That might be a mantra, too.

Jason's breathing had steadied out, and he clawed a dismissive hand through the air.

"*Drop it.* I hope you're at least *trying* with that little bird monster of yours, or the way I turned out is going to look like nothing." A slightly different discomfort crossed Bruce's face, and Jason confirmed a bulls-eye to himself and then moved on before they could get derailed into discussion of Damian Wayne.

"I made my own choices," he told Bruce again. It seemed like they were moving in circles, but maybe if they repeated themselves enough times something would get through. Jason didn't really want to fight either, not today, not here. Not even just because fighting was the easiest thing he knew and retreating to it was like breathing, only more cowardly.

But he didn't want to lose, either. "I have always made my own choices. And I always will."

That look flickered on Bruce's face; the angry, controlling, compulsive one he got looking at a murderer with a gun, jaw solid as a cliff-face, and then as Jason watched he sent it away, and looked ten times more tired than before.

"I've dedicated my whole life to stopping people making some of your choices," he said. "I can't make an exception for you."

And now Jason felt cold. So cold, it was like Mr. Freeze had broken into the hospital and started firing at random. "So what you're saying is there's no point in us saying sorry," he bit out, distantly. Even the pain in his chest had stopped, like it was frozen too. "There was no point in me sticking around trying to do right by Dick. You're just going to dump me back in Arkham first chance you get, forever. Because whatever you *wanted*, this is what I *am*. Your greatest failure."

He showed his teeth, not sure whether he was smiling. "And I won't stay locked up in a glass case, or a coffin, or an asylum or a jail. Maybe I'll leave you alone and maybe I won't, but I'll keep killing 'til someone puts me down again, and it will always be *all your fault*."

Jason was right beside the door, now. He didn't have to get past Batman again; he could *leave*. Third time's the charm.

It felt...strange to be leaving without hurting anyone.

"It's your choice, Jason," said Bruce from behind him, as the latch turned. "It's always your choice."

"Not your fault after all, then?" Jason asked, unsurprised, not turning, or even drawing back his hand. Of course Batman wouldn't let that stick to him. He would get down in the muck for his work, sure, but he was always quick to shake the shit off his shoes when a job was done.

"My responsibility."

"To put me away?"

"If I have to." The sentence was heavy, weary, final. And yet after it came, just as heavy, just as weary, "Why won't you come home?"

"I did come home." He hated Gotham, but he always came back. He'd sworn this time he wouldn't, but he probably would. Not *soon*, though. Not after this. He shook his head. "It's too late, Bats. I told you. It's been too late for a long, long time."

"It's not," Batman shot back, fierce and stern suddenly. "I only ask one thing."

"What, I swear off blood and you wipe clean the slate?" Nothing was that easy. Jason had learned to recognize a scam sometime in first grade. He'd taken a risk on Batman the first time, that day in Crime Alley after the Dark Knight demanded to be shown to Jason's squat, and then invited Jason home with him.

Partly because there hadn't been many options that didn't involve juvie, partly because he'd *trusted* Batman, the hero, the knight of the back alleys, in a way you probably should never trust a rich dude, but also because the offer had been so huge that even the narrow chance it was for real had been too much to turn down.

It had seemed like the gamble worked out, at first. *Home*.

Just another lie for a stupid slum rat.

"I made you part of my family more than ten years ago," said Bruce, as if that meant anything.

"I'm not who I was then," answered Jason. And still he didn't turn around.

"It doesn't matter. Dick's right, Jay. Come home."

It was too gentle, that quiet invitation, almost a plea. It couldn't be real. He'd broken half his ribs before without it hurting like this. He wanted them to stop, to admit it was too late, stop pretending hope existed, when they wouldn't keep meaning it long enough to matter. He wanted to kill them all. He wanted them to stop guarding one another against the danger that was him when he came near. He wanted them to admit he was dead and gone. He wanted them never to be allowed to forget he existed.

"This is what I am," Jason insisted. Speaking to the door, still, but standing straight and unbowed.

"You've reinvented yourself half a dozen times since you came back to Gotham," said the voice from behind him, the voice that was flinty Batman but also *Bruce*, the man who'd sat by his bedside and come to his Little League games and laughed at his jokes and—and—  
"You can do it one more time."

"I don't belong to you," Jason whispered. He never would again. Not to *anyone*.

Bruce didn't answer right away. "I know," he said at last, sounding nothing like Batman. Which meant Batman probably *didn't* know, and never would, but if at least part of him could remember he'd admitted that— "Be whoever you need to be."

Jason would have laughed at the cheesiness of it, if he could find any humor through the weight that was bearing down on him, dragging his hand down on the handle where it rested, incrementally unlatching the door. "Even if that's someone you can't forgive?"

Bruce's breath was heavy enough, for a moment, to drown out Dick's. "Is that really what you want?" he asked.

Not exactly a challenge. That same question again, the one he'd asked the ghost.

Jason pressed his forehead against the cool plastic of the exit. *Yes. This is who I am. This is what I want. This is **necessary**.*

"If anyone asked you to turn your back on Gotham and put Batman on ice for them, it's them you'd get rid of." His voice was hoarse for no reason. "You've done it before."

"It means that much to you."

Jason pulled antiseptic air through his teeth. "Maybe." He ground his molars, and Bruce gave him time to gather words he'd never even tried to think before. "Maybe trying to solve *everything* by killing people was some kind of fucked-up adolescent rebellion, or the Pit, or both, or...something. But never letting anyone die, no matter how much they deserve it... that's *your* rule. Hell, even the *police* are allowed to kill."

"In defense," Batman pointed out. "Not revenge."

Jason rounded at that, so fast and hard the door handle dug into the top edge of his hipbone. Batman was still standing there, unmasked, near the end of Nightwing's bed, heart monitor line jumping behind his shoulder.

"It always comes back to that! *Your* specter, *your* fear of what you could become. I turned myself into your nightmare, but that doesn't mean...."

He fell silent. Choked on a sudden understanding, on dawning realization. He and Bruce stared at one another across the clean-new-start white floor, smudged already with a path of dirty footprints from bedside to door.

Jason had turned himself into Bruce's nightmare.

That was the truth. Maybe he really, honestly wanted to kill people. Not, like, as a *hobby*, but when people really needed killing. Batman's line in the sand was a little more arbitrary than he liked to admit. Jason had real, actual, reasoned opinions about it.

But here he was, ugly truth he'd known all along escaped into the air: a lot of what he'd done had been about nothing more than Bruce's reaction.

He didn't *know* what he wanted.

He didn't know what he *wanted*.

"Jay," said Bruce. As soft as Jason's first apology. "Come home."

Jason shook his head. "I make my own choices. I *have* to make my own choices."

"I know."

"I *tried to kill your kids*." It came out furious, incredulous, imploring.

*How, Bruce? Why? How can you not be lying to me, about this?*

"You're sorry." It wasn't a question, but Jason nodded anyway, then wondered why he had.

"Tell them that. Tim's already offering you another chance, or he'd still be here."

Drake had offered him a dozen chances, and had them all spit on. He'd never even known the old Jason. Why would he still be trying? For Bruce? Out of some obscure personal guilt?

It was true, though. *Your word means zero*, Dick had said, that wild blood-and-fire night when he'd tried to kill every single one of the people who had never really been his brothers. And Drake and the little demon had so much less reason to forgive him *and they'd still given him a chance*. Like Dick and Leslie, and now *Bruce*. Chances he didn't even want, just pouring in, and he'd accepted them, this time, he'd already accepted this much without ever intending to. Some perverse part of him wanted to shred all of it just when it looked like they hadn't been wrong—because it was a *trap*, because it would be so utterly hilarious if any of them *actually* gave him *one more chance* even after he betrayed this....

But he felt Leslie's eyes on him, kindly judging, and the Flash's, scornfully condemning, and even that weird knowing look he'd gotten from Harper and that weird—*not-anger* from Superman, and it wasn't quite worth being the hysterical monster in their eyes just to hurt the Bat clan, and what did he *want*?

What was he going to do?

"I'm not..." he said, not knowing how he intended to finish, and was more grateful than annoyed when Batman didn't wait for him to find his thread.

"Alfred will be thrilled. He'll make all your favorites."

The few times Jason had visited the Cave since his resurrection, he'd scrupulously avoided encountering the old butler. He let out a cracked chuckle. "You don't even know what I like anymore."

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "Not chili dogs?"

"I guess you can never be totally wrong with chili dogs." Jason's tongue pressed against the back on his teeth. "You don't want me there," he insisted. "Not this me." He'd never belonged in the first place, not really, not a street rat like him in a place like Wayne Manor, and *now*....

"And you can't buy me." Not with money, of course. Not even with love, not anymore. He'd learned that lesson, even if it took a crowbar and explosion to the face and three months as a zombie and a Lazarus bath, and even after all that a newspaper, to tell him how cheap his life and death had been.

Not caring was *good*. It was his safety. It was never being hurt again, just as never trusting and backstabbing-first were never being betrayed, as killing first was never again being killed. If you laughed everything off, nothing could get its claws into you.

That wasn't who he used to be, of course; Bruce was right, he'd come off the streets caring so *hard*. Gullible, even as he tried to be canny, stupid as soon as his heart got involved. Dumb-ass kid. He and Bruce had taken turns being the cynical one, and believing when the other one couldn't.

But even at his most cynical, Jason had always known that (absent shortcuts like alien powers), the strongest were always the ones with something to fight for. Even if it was just money or fame, or strength itself. You needed something. To push you, to give you an edge in every sense of the word. He'd sharpened himself with hate for years, with the *need* to see despair (regret, surrender, *acceptance*) in Batman's face before he died, with the need to know he was strong enough never to be used again.

And then he'd lost track of it, maybe when Bruce looked at him and seemed to despair but wouldn't break, or maybe when Batman had cut his way out of Jason's trap through Jason's flesh. He'd hated him just as much as ever, probably more, but there was no goal anymore, no *towards*. Just rage. If he was honest, he'd been drifting ever since.

Inconstant. Nightmare.

That might be all he had, but it was *his*. One thing that had never wavered in him in all of both his lives was that Jason Todd was not for sale.

Maybe that was what Bruce meant, when he said that stupid kid in Crime Alley was strong. Jason didn't know how *not* to fight.

Bruce, who couldn't hear his thoughts no matter how he liked to pretend, let out a long sigh. "I'm not trying to buy you. Or trap you."

Jason raised a hand, cutting Batman off. It worked, wow. "This offer you're making. How long would it really stay open, if I don't change for you? How many times can you let a killer walk in and walk away? How much can you trust me near the demon brat, and what kind of message will it send him, if you let me come and go with smoking guns?"

Jason could see Bruce hadn't even thought about that. Bad example to the recently-reformed child assassin. Just how impulsive had this overture *been*?

"He's a lot like you were," Bruce remarked after a moment. And that terrified him, the thought of losing another one. Of another Robin lying dead, or drenched red to the elbow, or both. Jason could see the shaken look in his eye, the way he angled himself subtly to protect the helpless bird behind him.

"I didn't have blood on my hands at that age," said Jason flatly. Not in any way that counted; he hadn't been a killer in his first life, not like little al Ghul was. Hoity-toity little princeling with his crisp vowels and refusal to crack a smile. "And if your kid knows how to have fun, he hides it really well."

"He's not you," Bruce agreed, easily. "You're all different. People are," he added, dry and pointed. *Yes, I actually know you're a person*, he might be saying, or maybe, *Tim and Damian are people too*.

Jason snorted, half-chuckling, scrubbing a hand across the back of his head again. Bruce's eyes lingered there as Jason's hand fell. On wild red hair. "I never wanted you to be Dick," he added suddenly. "And I didn't mean to make you think so."

*I didn't mean* instead of *I'm sorry*, but fine. Jason *had* told him to stop spamming apologies. He tugged at a lock of that bright red, arching his eyebrows. "You sure?"

"You dyed your own hair when you decided to be Robin," Bruce reminded him. "Without saying anything to me. You *chose*." He shrugged a little, then. "It was convenient to the mission, so I facilitated it, but I *never* asked for it. It never occurred to me you minded."

Jason had never brought the subject of his hair and his identity up with Bruce. He'd been talking to Dick, clearly. Or more likely, Dick had made written reports about literally everything that had happened while he was Batman, and Bruce had committed it all to memory. Because who in this family talked to each other?

Him and Bruce, apparently. Today.

The sharp point in his chest seemed to have shrunk—it wouldn't last, he knew, but face to face with Batman and in this little pain... His lungs filled easily. "You're an idiot," he told the old man, smirking, because he was. He was *so* bad at people for such a good manipulator, it was kind of amazing.

"So I've heard."

Jason snorted. Sarcastic dumbass. As ever. "So you really want me to come back to the house," he said, tasting the idea. "Everything you wanted me not to be, and all."

The corner of Bruce's mouth curled up. He looked more like Jason remembered him, smiling. There'd been grimness aplenty and oh-so-much stern Bat judgment, of course, from the beginning, but wryness always made him seem younger, more like a person and less like a symbol. "You're looking for the catch."

"Always."

He said it like a joke, but it wasn't.

Jason had learned not to let his weaknesses show long before he'd ever met Bruce Wayne. Maybe *that* was all the man had really been seeing, when he'd thought he saw all that strength in the stubborn-ass street kid who'd taken his tires. That and a whole load of attitude. He'd

done his best not to let Bruce see how much he cared when they'd been partners, because needing someone could be used against you so incredibly easily.

His best hadn't been very good.

Bruce knew he wasn't joking. Went serious again in response, and Jason hated it, hated the bare solemn face with the cowl crumpled behind, blue eyes narrow like they could take him apart all on their own. "I've told you it isn't a trap."

"But you haven't said how long it will last." And there was no way he was putting himself in that position—he needed *no one*. Slackening that policy for Bruce all those years ago, no matter what he got in exchange, had been one of his worst failures of judgment, even now. There was always a price, and Jason wasn't walking into this without *knowing* that he could either afford to pay it, or walk away again without paying.

"As long as it can."

They stared at each other for stretching seconds. Words hung in the air between them, *What did you want from me?* and *I can't trust you*, swelling huge as though they had a whole skyline to occupy, and not the narrow, sterile confines of Nightwing's private room, in a field hospital so new it still looked clean and fresh, except where people had already begun to mark it with the filth they trailed behind them.

That was it, really, the beginning and the end of them. Wishful thinking filled in the gaps between, but that unanswered question and that intractable fact pinned them in place.

Jason had never been the secretive type. Not really.

"I can't trust you," he announced. Shrugged a little, as if to take the edge off the sting of it. "You can't trust me, either, and you know it. We've got a ceasefire going here. Red Robin is going to be expecting reports. That's enough, old man. I'm alive and not plotting your deaths. Don't push it."

"Is it enough, though," Batman said, not a question. But then he paused, like words had made it almost to his lips before he decided they were the wrong ones. "You always wanted a home," he said, with less conviction than usual.

"I'm over that."

"Ah."

Jason shrugged a little, himself. What he didn't say was, *If I try to go to the house and pretend to be one of you I'll just ruin it.*

It was like when he'd avoided Flash and his daughter earlier; points of contact were potential points of friction, and détente was the most anyone should expect now.

But Batman was a stubborn ass.



"Whether you want it or not, my house is still yours," Bruce said. "I am not going to make my rules a condition of entry."

The house. Not the Cave. Family, not mission.

He wondered what it was costing Bruce to make that distinction, the one that had never really existed, to keep reaching out like this. So blatantly. Jason *knew* the guy. He'd rather put his balls in a vise than set himself up for a conversation about feelings. *And he was doing it anyway.*

It made up for the way he'd given up on Jason for a while there, after Arkham. He'd tried for a long time, before that, but maybe Jason had given him just a little too much encouragement, today, because he was plowing into this with the same grim determination he used to put himself through anything that hurt.

The first time Bruce had taken a physical beating for him, after Jason screwed up and a minor-league villain got him on the floor, it had struck him speechless for a whole hour, until Bruce started getting worried he'd suffered a head injury or something and snapped him out of it.

"No conditions?" he asked, not believing it for a second.

"Don't hurt anyone while you're there," Bruce replied instantly, and it was such a ridiculously minimal rule Jason laughed again.

"What if they try to hurt me? Face it, old man," he added, "the current Robin is kind of homicidal." (And has every reason to hate me. *Everyone* in your house has every reason to hate me. *Including you*, what is wrong with you?)

"I trust you can defend yourself without escalating."

"Wow, trust. Fine. Deal. Is that it?" Escalation was Jason's *specialty*, and trusting him to not do it was not an example of wisdom, but *being Batman* wasn't exactly a shining example of good sense, so maybe he shouldn't be surprised. Still, though, Bruce tended to err on the side of paranoia, not trust.

Of course, when you thought about it, the odds of Jason doing anything fatal without giving plenty of warning were relatively low, on the scale of serial killers one might invite into one's home, and if he went to Wayne Manor he'd be surrounded by highly trained vigilantes who could team up on him in plenty of time to intervene if he did try anything. They probably wouldn't be stupid enough to let him get anyone alone.

He could sneak into Grayson's bedroom and catch him convalescing, though.

Bruce hesitated.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Of course it's not. You always ask everything from people." Until he drove them away. But they kept coming back, over and over again, not because he offered

them anything for serving with him but because they couldn't shake the need to impress him. To gain his *approval*. Jason was wise to his game. "What do you *really* want?"

"The same thing I always wanted."

Jason snorted. "Obedience? Dream on."

Bruce sighed, the short sharp sigh of honestly-son-we-just-went-over-this. "I want you to be happy."

"Insofar as that does not compromise The Mission," Jason finished.

Bruce rolled his eyes. Honest to god. Not, admittedly, the full-face teenage contortion of exasperation, little more than a flicker of the eyeballs up toward heaven as though praying for patience, not that Batman ever would. "If you can tell me—honestly—that you've been happy in the year since you broke out of Arkham, then no, I...have no further requests."

Jason ground his teeth, exasperated, because he could *say* it, but he doubted he could make it believable. "I've been better this year than I've been in a long time." *Because I wasn't in Gotham, and I wasn't dealing with you.*

"Good," Batman said, too firmly. "That, that's good. But..."

"Yeah, okay, not *happy*, Jesus Christ, when did we go to live in a Lifetime movie; who exactly do you even know who *is*?" Ridiculous condition unmet, Batman had some further demand for him. "Spit it out, already."

Bruce paused for long enough Jason started to feel the beginnings of dread. Forget the fact that whatever-it-was was supposed to have his happiness as the goal; if it was making Batman this uncomfortable....

"I've recently been in contact with a woman named Astrid Ming," Bruce said at last, too levelly. "She's a minor psionic whose main ability is shielding herself against other psychics. Her niece recently joined the Titans under the name Moonracer, and the whole family passed all associated background checks."

"Your paranoia is really impressive; are you getting to the point?"

"Ming is a capable psychotherapist."

What was left of Jason's good humor disappeared. "Not this shit again."

"Jason—"

"I'm not *crazy*."

"You're *hurt*."

Breath raced furiously through Jason's teeth, and he found himself fingering a knife in one pocket and the naked bullet Flash had returned to him in the other. He wasn't crazy. He *was*

*not crazy*, he was nothing like the Joker, and he was *not* going to prove any of these sons of bitches right. "I don't. Need. A *fucking* headshrinker."

"Jason—"

"I'm not a broken toy for you to fix by throwing money at a specialist. You can't make this go away that easy."

"I'm aware of that. *Jason*." For the first time since before Jason had laid his hand on the doorknob, Bruce took a step closer, the cape flaring briefly in the dead air. "The message I left..."

"Don't." Jason ground his teeth. If Bruce was going to be sorry for *anything*, it should be that. He'd finally started to put his pieces back together, and then there'd been *that*.

*Of all my failures, you have been the biggest. Wayward. Self-destructive. Broken. You needed repair, and instead I gave you an outlet. For that, I apologize.* It's not too late for me to help you. *It's time for you to stop.*

...'Alfred knows a brilliant doctor.'

Son of a *bitch*.

"Dick says I hurt you," Bruce said. And the look on his face wasn't the set, righteous look he'd had in that *fucking hologram*, it was just...Jason couldn't read it, but the eyes were softer than usual. "That you hated it so much he was able to use the recording as a weapon. I..." He paused. "It was never meant to do that."

It had been bothering him, Jason realized. Since whenever Dick had seen fit to share that little tidbit. His chronic habit of never trying to see anything from anyone else's point of view unless they were an enemy he was trying to get ahead of, he'd had that flung in his face plenty of times, but maybe the idea of his dying message to someone being so much the wrong thing to say that it *literally drove him insane* was a little bit of a wakeup call.

That...might explain a lot, actually.

Bruce shook his head, as if shaking away cobwebs, and tried to catch Jason's eyes. "Please, Jason. Even from the beginning, you needed...you *deserved* some way besides retribution to work through your feelings."

"I," Jason growled, "am not *broken*."

If he let the bright fire of his anger fade at all, he could feel tears waiting to rise. The lead of the bullet between his fingers was starting to flatten, his grip was so tight, and he had the wild thought that if he managed to crush it then he'd *have* to stop holding back, like it was his self-control in metal form, and if he destroyed it he could just smash everything until they took him down, locked him up again.

Bruce swallowed. "I never should have called you that," he said, which wasn't agreement. He still *thought* it, couldn't unsay it. "And I should have known asking you to turn all your pain

inward and make it into rage would be harmful, over time. That was why I said it was my fault, that you've kept trying to solve everything with vengeance ever since."

"My choice," Jason repeated, blankly, bleakly.

Bruce closed his eyes, and if Jason was going to attack him, it had to be now. He'd never get Batman more vulnerable, not unless he accepted that fucking trap of an invitation and hung around the house until no one thought he was a threat anymore and *then* struck, but his hate wasn't nearly sharp enough now to keep him from feeling sick at the thought. "Yes," Bruce acknowledged again, as though lifting a heavy weight. Opened his eyes, and his expression—softened, just a thread. Almost like a smile, for him. "Am I allowed to be proud of you for taking responsibility?"

Okay, now Jason really *was* going to cry. Or throw up. *Fuck*.

His right hand left its knife-hilt and clamped over his mouth as he ducked his head, like he thought he could hide behind his hair, his shoulder braced against the door as he tried to keep it together. He wasn't crazy. *Fuck*, he wasn't, he *wasn't*, and it didn't mean anything that Bruce had said *proud*, or that he'd asked for *permission*; nothing had changed, nothing ever would, they were trapped in this cycle, this bloody, angry cycle that Bruce had started all those years ago when he was just a little kid screaming into the night for justice, scraping out thoughts of being a doctor or a fireman, throwing whatever childhood he could've still had with that gunshot ringing in his ears onto the fire called rage.

And how had he never thought that before, before Leslie and Bruce laid it out tonight. He'd known the story, they all did; how had he never...?

"Jason?" Bruce asked, and there was a note in it, like he was scared, like he thought he'd fucked up again and *broken* the fucking zombie he'd given up on years ago. Again.

"Shut up," the Red Hood rasped.

And Bruce *did*. Shut his mouth and just *stood* there, doing his gargoyle impression (a lot less convincing here than on a nice Neo-Gothic rooftop) while Jason got his head back in order, like an overstuffed closet that had vomited onto the rug and needed everything shoved back in.

It didn't take long; he was well-trained and had lots of practice. Finally he raised his head, knowing that little interlude had done nothing for his argument about the shrink. "Okay," he said levelly. He was fine again. "Talk."

To Bruce's credit, he didn't actually bring up the excellent piece of evidence Jason had just provided for his side. "It shouldn't be something to be ashamed of," he said. "Anyone who has been through *half* of what you have would benefit from assistance processing it."

"Okay, ignoring the blatant hypocrisy of the words coming out of your mouth, this Ming woman does PTSD counseling? Army vets and stuff?"

"Actually, she specializes in family therapy."

Before Jason could analyze the strange intonations Bruce had used in that sentence, there came the click of someone laying hold of the door handle from the other side.

## Chapter End Notes

I really tried very hard to make this simpler, because seriously, these two have broken 15,000 words and \*they're still talking.\* But hey. I figured 'ridiculously too much' is probably preferable to 'none.' (Please let me know if this conclusion was correct.)

Pretty much all new-ish references here are to Battle for the Cowl. (Ming and her niece are not a canon thing, but the Titans have always had high turnover, so I figure this for not-implausible.) And believe me, if Bruce's dying message to Jason hadn't been 'it's my fault you're fucked up, please get therapy,' I would not have considered this a reasonable direction for him to take this conversation in. \*But it was.\*

Coming back after story long finished because I realized I know how to do links now, and arcelian's fanart for this chapter deserves proper fanfare: [here it is!](#)

# And Did You See?

## Chapter Notes

Surprise! This isn't the last chapter after all! I've cut the intended last chapter into two, because it had grown too long, and judging by previous feedback nobody wanted to wait even longer while I tried to edit it down to a reasonable posting size. And thanks again for all of that feedback, as well as your patience. I know I've mentioned this before but even the briefest comments helped me keep grinding through the writer's block. In a dozen different ways, this fic would not exist past the first chapter without your support.

On a related note, oldmythologies started an awesome podfic of this fic! I still get starry-eyed over it. Check out her dying Nightwing voice, it is *more dying* than Sean Bean. And arcelian did a fanart for last chapter! :D I don't know how to do links, but you can find one in the comments for 'Leading the Blind.' :D :D :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Okay, ignoring the blatant hypocrisy of the words coming out of your mouth, this Ming woman does PTSD counseling? Army vets and stuff?”*

*“Actually, she specializes in family therapy.”*

*Before Jason could analyze the strange intonations Bruce had used in that sentence, there came the click of someone laying hold of the door handle from the other side.*

Alarm seized him, alarm and an obscure guilt, like he was nine years old again and caught with his hand in someone's pocket, and he dodged the opening door like it was studded with knives. Took up a position beside the entrance with an artful slouch a second later, though he suspected he looked exactly as convincing as a cat that had just missed its jump and was pretending it hadn't wanted to get any higher anyway.

Obviously he didn't fool Bruce, and just his luck, the door opened to reveal the imperturbable face of Nurse Rourdan, who he probably wasn't fooling, either, even if she didn't know exactly what he was being overly casual *about*. Still, could be worse. Could be...pretty much any superhero in existence. Or Leslie, which would be all kinds of awkward after what they'd talked about earlier.

Her hands were full, proving she actually did patient care, not just visitor wrangling, and she pulled up sharply in the doorway when she saw Batman looming between her and her patient—to Jason's disappointment, Bruce had used the moment of rattling-doorknob and Jason-freakout to get his mask on again, just as though it had never been off. He could almost have been hallucinating the old man's eyes this whole time, if he didn't know better.

(Two seconds to get the cowl settled was nothing. Back when he'd been Robin, he used to use a stopwatch sometimes to time Bruce's insane ninja costume skills. If no one was looking at him, he could get a tux off and the entire Batsuit on in less than eleven seconds. The fact that he wouldn't do it if anyone could see suggested he looked completely hilarious scrambling into the costume in a rush, and Jason had always regretted never successfully spying on the operation.)

Rourdan glanced at him and seemed only slightly less unnerved, and Jason felt obscurely grounded by it, though he wasn't sure whether that was the evidence that he was still intimidating, or at the implication that he *wasn't* as intimidating as Batman. At least not without his own mask, at least not to someone who'd met him and spoken to him but didn't know anything about him, really. He rolled his shoulders back against the wall and spread one arm invitingly, crooked grin rising.

"Go ahead, *Dad*," he goaded. "Don't mind Rourdan, she's a medical professional. What were you saying?"

Rourdan looked back and forth between them like she was expected to walk between hungry lions to get her job done, and was trying to work out which one to throw steak at and which to tase in the muzzle.

Batman's jaw was clenched tight enough to risk breaking teeth, but the half-second it took the nurse to make her decision, treat them both as paper tigers, and stride toward her patient was not enough time for his patience to fail. She followed the smudged path from the door to the bed with her bags of mysterious fluids, and exchanged them for the flattened ones hanging over Dickiebird with quick, professional movements tense with the weight of Batman's attention at her elbow.

Even if she *was* an assassin or saboteur slipped into the ranks of the Justice League medstaff, a poisoned IV bag wouldn't hook into his veins any different than the normal one, and there was no way someone with as much spunk and life in her as Rourdan would have taken on the suicide mission that was ripping out Nightwing's jugular port right in front of Batman.

Only not literally suicide mission, of course. Because Bruce said he wouldn't do that, even for Dick. Maybe he even wasn't lying.

The actual suicide part would be killing someone the Red Hood had promised to protect right in front of *him*. (Even if you'd convinced him to give you all his guns.)

But whatever, Rourdan made no move that could be interpreted as assassination, and seemed to finish up extremely quickly. She glanced at the monitors, checked the neck catheter, entered some more data on the tablet, and then replaced it in its slot, and announced with the kind of calm you worked for:

"That was the urgent part, so I think I'll just come back later. Will I need a mop?" The last part was just for Jason, with a little arch of her eyebrow.

"Nah," he answered, knowing his bantering tone wasn't quite right, he was too tense, his mouth stretching too tight over his teeth when he smiled. Especially the swollen part where

he'd been speed-punched. "I've mostly got killing him out of my system these days."

She thought it was a joke, and smiled at him (not at Batman, Batman was much too intimidating) as she let herself out. As Jason turned back to the man in the black cape, he had the slightly desperate impulse to chase after her and drag her back. Take all the time you want checking on the bluebird, lady, please. I have been so utterly done with this conversation about five times, but he's making it hard to leave, and my pride won't let me start a fight.

He wondered what she thought was going on. He'd said 'Dad' just now and earlier called Nightwing his brother—did she think that was literal? She wasn't from the Gotham area or she'd have recognized his trade handle; he'd made the Red Hood downright notorious over the last few years. He even still had supporters from his Twitter campaign days. But Rourdan was gone, and he couldn't hide behind her.

"So?" he said. Pretending to relax back against the wall, tipping his head at its most insouciant angle. "You were saying?"

Bruce didn't answer right away—took a breath, and pressed his lips together, thoughtfully, and Jason felt his own tension kick up a notch as Batman just stood there, staring at him. Fucking cowl. Jason swore he sometimes saw that thing hanging in the air by itself judging him in his *dreams*.

Which, you know, if he had a shrink they'd probably have a field day with that, but like hell was he going to tell shit like that to anyone at Arkham. Not that anyone there had really tried that hard to get him to open up. Since Quinzel, the poor worthless bastards who couldn't get hired anywhere else were terrified to death of building up too much rapport with their patients. Of course there were still the arrogant ones, too, who considered themselves above such risks and were always pushing for that exciting break in some lunatic's case, but they considered Red Hood small fry. He hadn't killed enough *interesting* people for their taste. Jason felt his lip curl.

"Go on," he prompted. "I think we were somewhere around me being in need of repair."

"Healing," Bruce disagreed, like 'repair' wasn't his *own fucking choice of words*.

"Whatever."

Batman huffed, a sound part exasperation, part exhaustion—oh yeah, he'd been chasing lunatics for two days straight and then fought a war too, hadn't he? Was *he* hallucinating?—and part Jason-didn't-know-what.

"Jason," he said, and he was going to give the Red Hood a complex about his own name at this rate. "What happened to you was terrible. Of course it hurt you. Of course you're still hurting. But Jason...you need to live."

"I've been living." He hadn't just sat in the dark plotting and killing his teachers all these years. It was rich getting that from *Batman* of all people.



“Hm,” said Bruce. Obviously disagreeing but not arguing, which was smart because Jason walking out was still absolutely on the table. “You’re still the boy I knew. Just as much as you are anything else. And it’s not too late for...you’re not even twenty-five yet. You have so much future left to choose.”

Jason snorted. There was a hidden message there, under the obvious prod to rethink all his life choices, but he wasn’t going to go trying to unravel it. Bruce wanted to say something to him, he could *say* it. “I dunno, I’m pretty set in my ways, old man.”

“You aren’t.” Almost the peremptory gruffness of the challenged Bat returned, and then a softer voice again. “I thought...but Jason, you said you were *sorry*. You haven’t...” He shook his head a little. “Since you came back, I’ve never seen you look past your own pain.”

“The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

Batman’s mouth drew into a tight line, and Jason had never hated the cowl more. But when Bruce spoke again, it still wasn’t in Batman’s voice. He wished it was. Batman was easier to ignore. Asshole. “It means that you were suffering, and that fact took up so much of your world that no one else’s pain seemed real enough to matter.”

“You mean *yours*?” he scoffed, because Batman could be a self-pitying asshole who made everything about himself, but he’d just *love* to see him argue that *his* feelings about what had happened *to Jason* deserved to be as important as Jason’s.

“No,” Bruce retorted, impatient, withering. “Not *me*. Everyone who you turned into the collateral of your private war. Tim. Damian. More than eighty confirmed victims whose names you never knew.”

Jason showed his teeth. “You make me sound like such a monster.”

And fuck, he deserved to sound that way, West was right and Jason wanted to kill him for it and *that was how he knew the man was fucking right*, and he didn’t want to think about it and *why was he still here*, god damn everything and the Justice League especially. He swiped his tongue over the half-sealed split in his lip, let the taste of iron spread through his mouth.

“I make you sound like a child,” Bruce snapped. “And you had the *right*. You were fifteen, and you went through death. Everyone is wrapped up in themselves at that age. But...Jason, you haven’t moved past that.”

“How do I ‘move past’ *dying*?” Jason spat back. “What’s the grieving process for yourself supposed to look like?”

“You *aren’t dead!*”

The little room was completely filled with yell for a second, Batman’s huge voice driven *up* the scale with frustration instead of down with menace the way it usually was when he lost control, and before the air had a chance to clear, the man shook off his own surprise at himself and barreled on, through clenched teeth, “Can’t you get that through your head? You

are *alive*. But even though you lived all these years, you still rage and grieve like you're fifteen. As though you've never left—"

He stopped, but Jason knew somehow what he had been going to say—maybe by the faint guilt in the set of his shoulders. *That warehouse.*

How dare he. How *the actual fuck* did he dare?

"You don't," Jason snarled, "know a damn thing about me. But even if I haven't, so what? Have you ever left that alley? Isn't there a part of you that will be eight years old forever?"

Bruce flinched. Instinctive as blinking when a blow came at the face, as Jason sunk a barb into his oldest wound, and wasn't one bit guilty this time. He'd give as good as he got, anytime. There were so many people who had it *so much fucking worse* than poor little Bruce Wayne, with his loyal butler and his mansion and his wealth to cushion the loss and give him the luxury of brooding over it, because he didn't have to worry about his future. Lots of people watched their parents die. *He was not that special.*

"There's *part* of me," the old man said gruffly, not looking at Jason, or at Dick. "That will never leave that wreckage in the desert, either."

And...damn.

Jason knew where Bruce left roses every year, and it was just the mouth of another alley off Park Row to him—he'd seen people fuck there and fight there and once been mobbed there by alley-cats wanting the roast beef sandwich he'd conned out of some lady. But to Batman that spot was the beginning of everything. And he'd just put Jason's death in the same category.

Jason had known he felt *guilty*. But this was maybe the first time he'd really believed that it *mattered*. (*No one could forget you*, his Replacement had said. *I've spent my career under your shadow*. And how the fuck had it been so hard to get that kid to hate him? He himself had hated Dick a little, pretty much the whole time he'd been Robin, even when he'd helplessly adored the jerk. Maybe it was harder to resent the dead. Maybe Replacement was just a wimp.)

His hands shook again. If he launched himself, now, landed an uppercut on Batman's ungarded chin and bounced his brain off the inside of his skull, then kicked the side of his right knee and jabbed at the pressure point at the join of his throat, then swung under the retaliatory blow and scooped up that damn bloodstained com unit again and threw it into the heart monitor so that got smashed. That would send up an alarm, so Jason would only have time to finish one of them before reinforcements arrived, and then—

Jason pictured himself driving a newly sharpened knife into helpless Dickie's eye socket before Batman could recover enough to stop him, and wanted to vomit.

Taste of his own blood and his own confused guilt and always, always the electric flavor of rage. But not enough of the last one to hold him up. Not anymore.

“If you cared so much,” he got out, stomach rolling, “if you cared so much *how did we wind up like this?*”

Bruce closed his eyes, behind the cowl. “I don’t know.”

And that...that was giving even more ground than saying it was all his own fault.

Jason let out his breath, long and slow, and felt like he was shrinking with it.

Why had he thought Batman would have the answers? If he had, he wouldn’t have screwed up so bad, over and over. They were both just...messed up, and confused, and...

“Yeah,” he said, and it was forgiveness, maybe, finally. Torn from somewhere deep in his chest. “Yeah.”

He pushed away from the wall, turned around, and the handle that had seemed so heavy before turned easily, and the door opened, hollow and weightless. The blank white corridor outside was deserted as Jason took his first step into it.

“Wait.”

Jason paused. He could give Bruce that much. Batman hesitated, and Jason was almost ready to declare him officially wussed-out and keep going, when,

“You never really answered my question.”

He set his teeth, glanced over his shoulder scornful, almost pitying. “We’ve been over this. There’s nothing I want that you can give.”

Except they both knew that if Jason believed that was true, really *believed* it down to his bones, he would have walked away already.

He needed to walk away.

*Why couldn’t he walk away?*

What did he *want*?

He stood there, in the open door, feeling stripped bare as a crab out of its shell. And that wasn’t him, he wasn’t a fucking *hermit crab*, scuttling from one shield, one safety to another, even if he *did* keep adjusting his persona, his angle of attack. That was *Dick*, if it was anyone, always moving on to the next thing, place, person, self. Always starting over. Jason didn’t do defenseless. He knew better.

But here he was, so stripped he felt *skinned*, raw. The same way every little noise and touch and *thought* had hurt in those first weeks-months after the Lazarus Pit, only he didn’t have the endless, buzzing energy of a recent resurrection to hold him up now, or a mission to fix his whole jumbled brain on and pursue at the expense of everything else. He was tired.

He just had Batman staring at his back, maintaining one of the loudest silences ever. He had a blank white wall staring back at him across a hallway, where someone might come along any second and see him frozen here. And...he had a question to which he didn't know the answer.

*What do you want, Jason Peter Todd?*

He swallowed. Sucked the swollen knot of flesh on his lip where the Flash had punched him between his teeth and bit down, let the pain hold his breathing steady. Let the taste of blood ground him somewhere familiar.

Jason wasn't the introspective type, normally; never really had been, and he had no time for philosophy unless he could mess with someone's head by tying knots in it. But today he was the one having his head messed with, and he hated them all equally for it, Grayson and Drake with their stupid shows of trust and Leslie and West with their fucking *lectures* and Bruce-fucking-Wayne with his...his whole goddamn existence; maybe Jason should pull himself together and kill the bastard after all. Maybe *then* the Bats would pull themselves together and kill *him*.

Fuck. Did he just think that? Yeah, coming back hurt worse than dying, but he was *too damn stubborn for death*.

When he closed his eyes, he saw that stupid Bat-brat in the waiting room earlier, with his feet swinging inches above the floor, and saw him going down in a spray of blood, even smaller a year and a half ago, and heard his own broken laugh.

Dress it up in psychobabble all he liked, Batman only talked this much when there was something he was talking around. And why he would choose *now* to be delicate, after so many things had been violently *forced* into the open here tonight, Jason wasn't sure. Except apparently he'd decided Jason's decision to save Nightwing, when he could have let him die, proved something. Proved there was something salvageable about his second Robin after all. And maybe he'd had the brainwave that telling crazy people they were crazy didn't usually work out that well.

It didn't matter. He didn't have to say it.

The thing was, Jason didn't need to be a deep thinker to know evil wasn't usually like the Joker, cackling at destruction for destruction's own sake and burning down the world. Most of the time, it was like Black Mask, or even like Penguin. Like Ra's al Ghul, Lex Luthor, like Egon the human trafficker, who'd taught him how to drive a man's nose into his brain and a score of other dirty, vicious moves that could kill in one stroke, helped him drive out Batman's carefully nonlethal style right up until Jason found out about the trafficked kids and pragmatically poisoned him to death—systematically, even *rationally* pursuing its goals, indifferent to the prices it made other people pay so it could reach them. Evil was exploitation, and careless cruelty; a boot on a child's reaching fingers, a gunshot in an alley not even because you were desperate, but because it was convenient and easy and made you feel powerful.

Jason had managed to be *both*. Calculated advantage and wild nihilism crashing together, drawing blood, striking flame.

And it didn't matter that he'd saved people, not really, or that monopolizing the drug trade really *wasn't* the least-effective approach to undermining it, or whether some people really *did* need killing, or any of it, because those hadn't been his real reasons. Bruce was right, and Jason could hardly stand under the fury and shame of that—Bruce was *right*. All he'd been able to see was how damn much he *hurt*.

Jason had been done playing the hero years and years ago. Sure, his first reaction when he saw a piece of scum like Egon living off other people's suffering was to take him down, and sure, he couldn't turn his back on the cape game completely, but he was soured on the whole deal. It was a scam. The last thing he wanted to be was Batman, wrapped safe in his cloak of self-righteous lies.

Villains had been telling him for years that he was just like them, and he'd been brushing them off. Nobody got it. Where he stood. Above and betwixt and between as a judge over the whole sorry mess of them.

He'd gone and stolen the #1 Hypocrite Award right out of Bruce's pocket, and fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

(Distantly, he heard the white plastic of the door starting to groan under his hand. Flimsy temporary construction.)

One little shred of moral high ground left to stand on, and maybe he could have salvaged this in his own head. But everything was turning to sand as he grasped at it, and the old man kept saying *sorry* and taking the blame for things, approximately the *right* things, even, which made blaming him completely unsatisfying. And he wanted to kill something so much it scared him. *Even* him.

As long as he could say he was in his own corner first of all because no one else was going to be, as long as he was angry, he could go on just that. When all you had was your pride, surrender was impossible.

But he was *sorry*, now, had come right out and said it without thinking through the consequences because *when had he ever thought about the consequences*, and Leslie had crowded into his corner, and Bruce was trying though Jason would never trust that it was for real. Could never. And he just wanted—

He wanted to go *home*.

Even more than he wanted to kill everyone who made him feel anything, more than he wanted the comforting recoil against his palm and the smell of gunpowder and the return of the fierce certainty that what he was doing would make a *difference* because no one could ignore it. He wanted to go home. But he couldn't.

He hadn't had a home in a very long time. He still didn't, no matter what Bruce said. But he *wanted* it, wanted to go back to the Manor and be fourteen and free, with Alfred solicitously feeding him up because he found the idea of how long Jason had gone hungry a personal affront. Wanted to go home to the apartment on Crime Alley and be six and simple, laughing with his Mom at the idiots competing on terrible game shows and eating crackers covered

with store-brand Cheese Whiz that he'd had no idea at the time was actually pretty disgusting.

But you didn't get do-overs in life, not even on your second or third chances, and those places he wanted to go home to didn't exist anymore. They were times, and people, not just places. And they were gone. Even if he time-travelled, or found a dimension where they hadn't been shattered, the Jason who'd belonged there would still be gone. He wasn't that person anymore. There was no going back.

He pushed the weightless door until the latch went *click*. For privacy.

"I get it," he said. Not sure it had been loud enough for Bruce to hear. He didn't turn around to find out. "Your rule," he said a little louder. "I get it now."

Because it wasn't some mystical line in the sand, was it? It wasn't even *I've done it once, so why am I hesitating to do it again?* (It gets easier every time, *that* part was true, always had been, even if the Jason who would have felt murder like a brand on his soul had died without bloodying his hands.)

It was *now*, hanging here in his head, on the prongs of the knowledge that he'd been killing for *the wrong reasons*, that for every scumbag he knew the world had profited by the loss of, there was someone he couldn't be as sure about. That someone had cried over as hard as Mom had cried for Dad, or harder. That he'd become the kind of person who had *victims*. He'd never killed randomly, but he'd done it *carelessly*, men and women he'd known nothing about but their gang affiliations. And he didn't want to think he'd been wrong, he didn't, *fuck*, that was the problem; if that had been murder—

*You really think you can look at someone once, see them do one thing no matter how bad, and know exactly what they're worth?*

If it had been murder, any of it, then *what was he?* If it had been murder, if he was a monster, then what was left but trying to be a good one, trying to *use* it, trying—if he'd killed people just to *get his dad to notice him*, how was he any better than that pathetic fuck Nobody, than that sniveling waste of skin they called Harley Quinn—

*Would it be justice, if another vigilante killed you for them?*

Jason half-wished he'd punched Leslie for that one. Because *yes* or *no*, he lost. Either he was just like the vermin he'd been exterminating, or he had to explain how he *wasn't* and—

If he was already damned, then what else was there? That was what had happened to the Batman of Earth-51, Jason knew. He'd thrown himself away, given up on life and it felt good, it felt so *free* even as it ate you alive. Like a goddamn drug. *Any fool can see you've been dead inside for years*, he'd said, and he'd known even then how easily it could be turned back on him, takes one to know one, all that shit.

But that wasn't it, not really; wasn't what made it so *hard* to stop, that just made it easy to keep on. What made it hard was the knowledge that if you stopped before it was done, before it was over, before you'd *won*, then everything you'd already done had been wasted. So you

could never admit you might have been fighting for the wrong thing, or the wrong way, because then what had all those sacrifices been for?

Batman was to blame for an awful lot of it, and the Joker still had a massive tab to pay, but Jason made his own choices and always had and wasn't a kid anymore. Which meant. Which meant *taking responsibility*, and.

He turned around, so he could look at the Bat standing near the end of Nightwing's bed. Watching *him*. Maybe to a stranger he would have looked impassive, but to Jason he looked like he was about to implode, and his vision went double for a second, the eternal judging cowl clashing against the hidden eyes underneath saying *come home*, and then it was that fucking lecturing *hologram* laid over the choked look on Earth-51 Batman's dying face.

Watching him die. The Bruce Wayne who'd thrown away everything else for the sake of Jason's memory, who accepted him as he was, who needed him so much. Who'd fought a whole world alone for a decade and then died a few hours after Jason came into his life.

Drake had no idea what Red Robin *meant*, how bad a failure it represented, even after hearing the story. And Jason didn't want him to. Let him have it. Robin was something that had been taken from Jason, and maybe he'd passed up his chance to reclaim it but he hadn't chosen to give it up, so he was only just starting to get over that, even now that Replacement had been replaced. Red Robin, though, he was *glad* to give away. That other Bruce Wayne had kept it ready for a dead man for seven years, and someone should wear it. Someone who still cared about saving Batman.

If Bruce would just push back, get angry, order him around and give him something to... Jason knew if he'd been on the other side of the room, by now he'd have been smashing things, breaking things, breaking already-broken Dickiebird, and he was for a second *grateful* Batman was there.

He didn't want to be a monster. He *didn't*.

He just wasn't sure how to stop.

"Can you...explain it to me?" Bruce asked, slowly.

Jason snorted, because it was a training sort of challenge, *you actually understand when you can explain it to someone else*, but the tentative way he posed the question made it sound like Batman didn't know if he understood his own self. "Nah. Don't feel like being graded on it, asshole. Just...what you said. Mistakes you can't fix." There were a lot of those besides killing someone. But Jason understood how that could be the biggest one. Especially to Bruce, who didn't accept much of anything as *impossible*, and had the money and stubbornness to get away with it a good 85% of the time.

Batman frowned. "I wasn't intending to judge you."

"Yeah, well," Jason said. Scoffed. *Speaking of* habits that were hard to break. (Though, yeah, he acknowledged that *murder rehab* and *judgmental asshole rehab* were on pretty separate scales of suck.)

Batman did that wry flat thing with his mouth, and tipped his head forward a little at the angle that was granting you had a point.

Jason snorted. “I don’t care what you think, really.”

“I know,” said Batman, definitely wry now, and Jason couldn’t help but grin.

He’d been lying, of course. He couldn’t actually just *not care*, or Bruce couldn’t have provoked a psychotic break with his dying message. But he could come pretty close. He could refuse to take Bruce’s opinions into consideration, reduce them to just a source of stress. But.

But there were other things that were harder to ignore.

The sharp pain in his chest. And the weight in his lungs.

The more times Bruce managed to not say the wrong thing, the thinner his shield of hatred got, the harder it was not to choke on hating himself. He might not have called himself *murderer* but yes, okay, he’d known what he’d become. He’d known from the start, what he was choosing. The reasons had seemed more than good enough, at the time. He knew it was his own fault he’d died and lost everything, he *knew*—and now he couldn’t pretend anymore.

*My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, and every tongue brings forth a several tale, and every tale condemns me for a villain.*

And it just figured that his conscience wouldn’t be bright-eyed Robin, standing clean and proud and ready to fight for justice, but a scraggly red-headed orphan, leaning up against a stained brick wall with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of a stolen pair of jeans. Bruises showing on one bony shoulder from under the fraying neck of his shirt, dirty and hungry and forgotten by the world. But that kid could look him in the eye.

Could, and did. A flash of color, more blue than green, frank challenge from a boy who felt no shame at living—just a flash, before Red Hood looked away.

Jason cared what *Jason* thought.

Thing was, there’d been a *reason* for that reckless lack of fear Bruce remembered. On the one hand, yeah, despite all the available evidence to the contrary he’d kind of felt immortal, because again, dumb kid, but even when he was *sure* he was going to die, he’d still been able to laugh, and *that* was because that kind of death just...wasn’t that scary. Quick and done, and met head-on with your head high, in good company? That was nothing. That was, practically, *victory*.

Everybody had to die someday, and no one was too young.

No, what Jason had been afraid of, even then, was dying from the inside, the way his (fake) mother had even before she started to die for real. Hollowed out until there was no reason to get up, until you didn’t even care whether you were alive or not, until you couldn’t even



make yourself care that people might be depending on you. It didn't have to be drugs, though that was one of the faster ways; you could do it to yourself just by thinking too much.

In the street, the sight of the living dead had always freaked him out way, way more than the corpses, even though you saw them every single day, and the bodies only as an occasional particularly nasty reality check. Despair zombies, loss-of-self zombies. The people who'd died already but hadn't quite gotten around to lying down.

He'd sworn he'd never be one of them.

Because the way he saw it, that wasn't something life did to you. No matter how shitty life managed to get, what you lost or how you failed, getting gutted like that was something you did to *yourself*. When you left yourself open to it. When you let yourself give in.

'He who has never hoped can never despair,' Shaw had had his Caesar say—Jason had chewed his way through Martha Wayne's whole collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century drama that frustrating summer just before he turned fourteen, healing from the broken limbs Godfrey's mob had given him, almost able to stop chafing against his invalid status as all of Barbara's tutoring finally paid off, and he got ahead of his grade level for the first time since he was eight.

There had been something so powerful in the *uselessness* of it, a luxury headier than deep baths or rich food, that he could do something like this and be *good* at it, no matter what people thought. It had felt like flying almost as much as swinging at the end of Robin's jumpline, and if Bruce had made incredulous faces whenever he came into the library to see Jason with his crutch forgotten on the floor and dusty books piled up around him, he'd never *disapproved*, and Alfred had been completely supportive, and expressed it with trays of food and British literary recommendations, and Babs had taken him to see Albee's *Three Tall Women* at the Tribune Theatre as a birthday present that August.

...that was a good memory, in a whole stockpile of good memories all gone as dusty as Bruce's mom's books, but the one that had set them off was still there: three in the morning, staying awake because Bruce wasn't home yet, Act Four and the palace is under siege and Caesar is lofty and sarcastic and sincere all at once in that annoying way people like him get. And that line catching in his head because it felt *true*, with that blazing intensity of truth that belongs to three in the morning when you are thirteen, especially when you're finding out that somebody famous wrote down one of your thoughts long before you were born.

Hope and despair aren't two sides of the same coin, they're closer than that.

*(That's the happiest moment, the oldest lady says at the end of 'Three Tall Women.' When it's all done. When we stop. When we can stop. But that was giving in. Gracefully, but what was that really worth?)*

Jason had learned very young how to live without hope.

You could find small things to hope for, of course, when your mom was dying and you knew it was only a matter of time, or she was dead and you were clawing your way through the streets, staying alive somehow without selling your soul. He'd held onto his pride. He'd held

onto his ability to see the bright side, find the joke. Anger he hadn't even needed to *hold*, it was a survival trait and fed on itself and kept you going when everything else in you was ready to give in.

Hope, on the other hand, was infinitely vague and distant, or else restricted to things like today's dinner. Sometimes it could help, if it was what you needed to prick yourself into effort, but most of the time it wasn't worth spit. Hope hollowed people out and made them give up on life when it was shattered too many times. Hope was just opening the door to despair. Hoping was for children. Jason *intended*. He intended every day to find enough to eat, and not get caught, and punch the universe in the *face* if it screwed him over.

It was a rule—not one he was always great at following, but a serious one. *Wanting*, aimed correctly, kept you alive. Wishing was for the birds. There was no future in teasing yourself with things that weren't real, that would never be real. That was the kind of thing that left you scrabbling to fill up the gap in your center where your dreams had been with anything you could get your hands on, and *that* was how you wound up a junkie, or rolling in the palm of some asshole's hand, or both. Jason knew better.

And sure, sometimes he'd still nurtured tiny, vague hopes that barely deserved the name, fantasies really, of things like *getting out*, somehow, someday, but day to day, he had lived without. Because there was no hope in Crime Alley, and pretending it would kill you, sure as hunger or poison. So would being afraid of consequences, or dwelling on how small a failure it would take to wipe out everything. You had to live inside of *now*. He hadn't lived in hope of a future. He'd lived because he was too stubborn to die.

And then Bruce had come along, and whisked him away to his mansion, and given him a home and a future, and a legacy to carry, and he'd allowed himself to *hope* again. Robin *was* hope. If wishing was for the birds, being a little bird with a foster father who owned half the world meant suddenly nothing was impossible. His own little Orphan Annie story, only with less baldness and singing, and more cathartic violence.

Maybe it was that resurrected habit of hoping that had sent him halfway around the world by himself, when the dream had begun to crack and he knew he couldn't save everyone, ever, no matter how hard he tried, and Bruce didn't *understand*.

That had sent him searching across continents for a woman who'd known his father and had a name that started with *S*. Hope, just as much as resentment toward the parent he already had, or even the older habit of going after what he wanted without asking permission or help from anyone, because he was all he really had to count on.

When he'd come alive to find himself amid the shards of all those hopes, he'd registered the pain of their shattering and the shrapnel studding his soul, but he hadn't even noticed the *absence*, not really. The old habit had come back easy, like it had just been waiting for him to need it again. He knew how to live without hope. It was the only safe way. When you hoped, or loved, or dreamed, that was just shit you could lose. Living without a future was *easy*.

Secretly, somewhere, he'd held onto the hope that Bruce really cared after all, and would prove it in the end, right up until the Batarang sliced his jugular and he fell bleeding, but... that had been it. The end of the last of the Robin lurking in him.

He hadn't even *noticed* he was living without hope again, until suddenly birds and bats and doctors were all cramming it down his throat.

It hurt. God, it hurt.

Hoping felt like dying all over again. Bruce said he was never frightened enough? Old bastard just didn't understand how to scare the kid who was too stubborn to stay in the grave.

## Chapter End Notes

The line about conscience at the start of Jason's fit of literature is from Richard III, Act V. When Richard has a bit of a meltdown. The Tim quotes are from Teen Titans #29 (the December '06 issue) when Jason broke into Titans Tower to rant at/beat up Tim. (Tim was actually much angrier than Jason makes him sound, btw. Also in this issue Gar can't remember whether Elastigirl died or not. I guess this means Rita wasn't his adoptive mother on New Earth? Retcons, man. @\_@)

Next and actually-final chapter should be out by the end of the month!

# And Did You Know?

## Chapter Notes

Ahem, so. You may have noticed that took twice as long as predicted. (Happy belated, Janna! And Happy Halloween to all.) But here we are! Last chapter. Only the epilogue left. :] Thank you all so much for sticking with me and Jason the whole way.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Hoping felt like dying all over again. Bruce said he was never frightened enough? Old bastard just didn't understand how to scare the kid who was too stubborn to stay in the grave.*

His eyes were still closed even though that meant having to work not to meet his conscience's challenging stare, and he realized his breathing was starting to pick up again.

"Jason..." murmured that too-familiar voice coated in gravel, and somehow Bruce had crossed the room to him in the however-many seconds since his eyes had crunched shut, without a sound or a breath of air, and was *right there*. His own bare hand was fisted in his shirt, over the body armor, where the pain of that rebellious twisting *thing* was ripping him apart, and he forced his eyes open as he felt a gauntlet on his elbow, and another on his opposite shoulder.

Jerked back from the sight of the looming Bat, and thumped into the smooth white wall, breath gusting out of him.

Bruce didn't crowd after him, had fallen back a step even, but that look on his face, even just the half of it that was showing below the cowl, that *worried* look, despite the extra lines and those hidden threads of gray, it was the same. The same as it had been all those years ago.

Jason was almost exactly Bruce's height, these days. He could look him back straight in the Bat-masked eye. His breathing was ragged, and he wanted to say it again: *I can't trust you.*

"Why won't you stop?" he demanded. Too raw, too honest. When he was twelve he'd been willing to trust Batman so easily with so much, but he'd never have risked asking him *why*. Now he trusted him with nothing and there was no reason not to ask, nothing left to lose or break.

"I never give up on things that are important."

Jason's eyes pricked, and he blinked, hard, banishing the unfamiliar heat, shook his head. "You should stop," he said. One last time. One last try.

He knew very well that Batman never stayed down. Never stopped.

But he knew even better that Bruce Wayne had a limit on his patience, on his warmth. That he'd failed as Robin, taken advantage of the man's generosity, even before he'd practically gift-wrapped himself for the Joker. That he was *this*, blood and guts and shattered laughter, that he had betrayed everything Batman ever wanted for him, and gloried in it. (That Batman had *deserved it*, but that didn't make it okay.) That this *could not be real*, and he could not risk himself on it, and it was too late because he already couldn't let go.

It was suicide, he knew that. Letting himself trust, letting himself *hope*.

"Just once more."

And...that wasn't his voice. That was Bruce, no, that was *Batman*, and there had never been a clear line between them because they were only one man, but there was still a divide.

"Please, Jason. You don't owe me anything. But give me one more chance. I *can't* lose you again."

That raw edge in Bruce's voice was familiar, by now. He'd heard it a few times as Robin, and carved it out a few times more as Red Hood, and even provoked it today. But he'd heard it even more recently than that. Just now. He'd heard it from *himself*.

It was as if what Jason had done, with his choices today, with his staying, and *staying*, and not betraying, was stab Bruce through with hope, the same way they'd all done to him.

And that made no sense because Bruce didn't need him, never had; he had so *many* people who loved him, he had his mansion and his mission. Like Leslie said, he'd never have to have an unpleasant day in his life if he decided that was what he wanted. He was the man who had everything. It didn't *matter* if he got to keep Jason in his little collection.

But it seemed like *he didn't know that*.

(Or maybe just didn't know it right now. Maybe he'd remember, later. Would Jason be strong enough to turn on him, if he did?)

If they both wanted this so much. Maybe.

Jason dug his teeth into his swollen lip, and thought about a day almost half a lifetime ago (a day *in another lifetime* who was he kidding) when Batman had stared him down and Jason had hit him with a tire iron and run.

He hadn't escaped then, either. Hadn't really thought he would.

But he'd still given it his best shot.

His eyes flickered shut for a second and again he met that measuring green-blue stare, from the kid he'd been. A child without hope, doing what it took to get by because he refused to lose his life at anyone's pleasure. But he'd also been angry, *fierce*, had stood up and spat in the eyes of cruelty and hypocrisy because there had been a lot of lines he was willing to cross, a lot of things he'd been willing to do to keep skin and bone together. But none of them had ever meant giving up who he was.

When the world said *change or die* he'd answered *no*, because he knew a bad bargain when he heard it.

Nothing in the universe could change Jason Todd unless he decided to change. He'd always believed that. Pickpocket, thief, grifter, cheat, and he'd have sold his body if that had been what it took. But there were some kinds of integrity that were worth dying for a hundred times over. He was who he was.

And yet in the end, after everything, he'd died at the Joker's pleasure. And he'd come back wrong, and that had changed him. And he'd gone through the Pit, and so had that, probably. And *then* he'd started changing himself.

He wasn't in control of his fate, maybe wasn't even captain of his soul, and he hated that, hated it so much he'd been willing to do anything to pretend it wasn't true. But every grand gesture he'd tried had backfired, and everything had spiraled further and further out of control, and he just....

Jason raised his eyes to Batman. Standing there, just out of arm's reach. Holding himself back. Not trying to force the issue, and not walking away from it. Because this was Jason's *choice*. And the thing was, that was taking a lot of self-discipline, obviously, which was something you took for granted in Batman. But. Handing over control of something important (it *was* important, *he* was important) to someone who had displayed a savant-like ability to make terrible decisions.

Control was everything.

Control yourself. Control your future. Control whether the people around you succeed, surrender, triumph, *die*.

Bruce had been fighting for that impossibility since he was eight. So if he could give this much—

Jason had chosen to walk up that ramp into the hover-ambulance. He'd chosen to stay here, not breaking the peace, except that one time. Before all that, he'd decided to get on his knees in the blood and try to save Nightwing.

He'd done something right, hadn't he. Something nobody could ignore, even him. That was why Bruce was here, looking at his greatest failure and not looking away.

Asking for one more chance. *Offering* one more chance.

My little brother, Nightwing had said. Not our enemy today, Red Robin had said. We all did, Leslie had said.

Never that kind of monster, said the Flash.

"I'm sorry," Jason repeated, one more time. And he meant he was sorry for using Bruce the way he had, for trying to come to terms with his own death by punishing Batman. But what

he found himself saying out loud was, “I’m sorry I failed you.” Not *as Robin* this time, because getting killed was the least of it. Even if that was where the worst of it started.

Bruce would never, ever be able to tell him now, *you’ve never made me anything but proud.*

But. That was the past.

*Maybe* he would still matter tomorrow. Only one way to find out.

There was more than one way to live in *now*.

“Not *me*,” Batman said immediately, and then clenched his teeth. “I forgive you,” he corrected himself. It was stilted and awkward, and Jason had the suspicion someone else had told him Jason needed to be forgiven, but.

Apparently, Jason had *needed* to be forgiven. His breath *whooshed* out of his lungs and he almost sagged into the wall. He’d forgiven Bruce for letting him die, he’d told him that from the start, and maybe he was starting to forgive him for the rest of it, too. For not knowing when he crawled out of his grave. For replacing him, for moving on.

He thought of Earth-15, where Bruce had been dead, where he’d been Batman. Wondered if Bruce would still have been alive, there, if it had been Drake at his back when whatever-it-was happened. Cautious, clever Drake, who knew how to make friends and how to keep a secret, how to hold himself back and how to believe beyond reason, the way Jason used to. “Sorry I wasn’t a better Robin,” he said.

Bruce’s fists clenched. “You have *nothing* to be sorry for. I should never have put you in that position. I—”

“Whatever,” Jason interrupted, because he didn’t care and that was so not the point. “I’m not your Robin anymore.”

Bruce frowned. Paused for a few seconds, like he was thinking, and Jason let him have them. “You do realize, Jason, that the costume—that *Robin* was never what made you important. I trusted you with Robin, as Robin, *because* I trusted you.”

“And I let you down.”

“You didn’t—no. You never let me down. You weren’t perfect, but...no one ever is.”

“What, not even Bluebird?”

Bruce gave him a very patient look. “I am fairly sure that in the entire time you lived with me, Dick and I never went more than a month at a time without a serious disagreement.”

Jason had to allow that. At the time, he’d seesawed between smug that Bruce didn’t snap at him like that and worried it *would* be like that, when he was Dick’s age. The irony. He cocked an eyebrow. “Not even you?”

Batman's voice was very dry. "It is a comfort to know that if I ever became deluded enough to believe myself infallible, I would have my family to set me straight."

Jason thought of Earth-51 again, and swallowed.

*You never let me down* was so completely untrue, and he wanted to get mad at Bruce for lying to him. But it wasn't that kind of lie, was it?

He wasn't sure who he was anymore. What he wanted. Hadn't been in longer than he wanted to examine. But whoever he was—Jason Todd the undead Red Hood, monster, vigilante, street trash, former Robin—he wanted to go home. And that...that was a place to start, right? If he was going to try living like he was alive?

*(And then go home. Or make a home. Or rest.)*

"You know," Jason said. "I...really hate fucking up." He wasn't the perfectionist little shit his Replacement always had been, or as bad as Bruce. Maybe not even to Grayson levels; there was something in the obsessive way the guy sometimes trained...but. He *really* hated fucking up.

"Mm," Bruce agreed. Gave himself a small shake, and belatedly pulled the cowl back again, so Jason could see his eyes and didn't have to imagine them. With Batman's fixed inky glower dismissed, he could confirm all over again that little *please* still lingering. He stared at it, for long enough that someone who wasn't Batman would have started fidgeting, or demanded to know what he thought he was looking at. And it stayed put, even as Bruce's eyebrows climbed questioningly. Jason watched it, waiting for it to rabbit.

And he just...breathed.

"So," he said at last. "*Family* therapy. Me. And you?"

Pale blue eyes didn't flicker. "It's a little hypocritical to say you should go if I won't."

Jason snorted. "Yeah, you could say that. Not like that stopped you before."

"In my defense, that was advice intended for a scenario where I was already dead," Bruce said mildly. It was okay, though; he was doing the point-acknowledged tilt thing with his head again.

"So you're saying you want *this* to not be a one-time thing. You want to put us both through this...what, once a week?"

"Approximately."

"Leslie says you *bit* your last therapist."

"I was *nine*."

"You were twelve." Jason was guessing.



“Ten.”

“Eleven.”

“*Ten*. Barely.” Bruce was making the uncompromising Bat-face, the one that just *dared* you to question him, with just a hint around the edges of his being aware that this argument was totally ridiculous, but he probably wasn’t lying; he knew Jason could and would check with Leslie. The look broke into a smile, suddenly, the one Jason had only ever seen in the best moments, when Bruce forgot to wish that Dick had never left.

*I did that*, he thought. *I can make him happy*.

It had been a long time since he’d felt like he had the power to make anybody happy.

“Okay,” he said. Bruce blinked. “Okay, I’ll try it.”

Bruce blinked again. “You’ll...”

“I will come to your house and act like a civilized human being, and Alfred will probably feed us dinner and expect us to talk like normal people. Relatives. It can be like one of those legendary awful Thanksgivings neither of us ever had.” Actually, he wasn’t *sure* Bruce hadn’t—he’d been in Leslie and Alfred’s custody as a kid, but he did have a couple of cousins on his mom’s side, and he took family seriously, in theory. He might have spent at least one holiday with them. But if so, it must have been *impressively* awful, because the experiment had not been repeated or referred to ever in Jason’s hearing. “And if we survive that, we can see about this Doctor Ming.”

Bruce blinked a third time, and Jason realized he had not actually believed Jason was ever going to cave, but before he could get mad about it, *the smile* broke again, wider, brighter, and Bruce said, “That’s, that’s great. Jason.”

And, okay, he just made Batman stutter. While smiling like Jason had caused the sunrise. He could forgive a lot, for that.

“Heh,” he said, shrugging. Was pretty sure he was wearing a pretty stupid-looking face himself. “Little soldier boy comes marching home.”

Bruce’s smile went sort of frozen and complicated, but what could you expect. Jason snorted again.

“I’m gonna need a while,” he warned. There was riding a wave and then there was letting yourself get swept away, and there was no way he was going today, or tomorrow. In fact he should probably just skip Dick’s whole convalescence.

You know. Just in case.

Bruce frowned, and Jason knew the guy was thinking that if he let him get away, he might change his mind and chicken out. “I figure I’ll be in contact with Drake for the next six to twelve weeks.” He doubted the kid *ever* slept six hours in a night, but that just meant a three-day adrenaline crash like this would hit him all the harder. “I’ll come by when that’s over.”

Shouldn't leave it longer, because then he really might chicken out. Weekly contact with his Replacement would either go explosively wrong, which was less likely to be a huge deal if it happened at long range, or ease him into being in civil contact, and either way it would give him a chance to adjust.

"Twelve weeks is too long," declared Batman, high-handed as usual. "No more than eight."

"Medium-sized-bird isn't going to much care for an intelligence report on the state of Wayne Manor," Jason argued, which was weak, but maybe he wanted it to be. Bruce smiled.

"He might," he disagreed, as mildly as Bruce ever said anything when he wasn't lying for his public. "Tim isn't home very much anymore."

"Right, because of the baby monster."

"Don't call him that."

"Did you know he listens better to commands in Arabic?"

Bruce raised an eyebrow, all *exactly how do you know that?* And to be honest, Jason didn't actually know if it was *true*; his success might have been the result of surprise as much as anything. It would make some sense if the little Ghul had learned English as a second or third language, though, and if English orders didn't hit his brain *quite* as directly as what he'd learned in the cradle. He hoped Bruce tried it. He hoped he was there to see the brat's face when he did.

Bruce's face had gone distant, for a few seconds, and now he focused on Jason again. "You want to know something funny?" he asked, and he was so completely *Bruce* that Jason expected to be called 'Jay lad' any second now.

"I dunno. Will it make me want to kill you again?"

"I hope not," said Bruce, which meant Jason should probably say no, but he wasn't much for doing the sensible thing, so he gestured, *go ahead*. Bruce's mouth caught on one side, wry. "You remember that when you and I met, Dick and I weren't speaking. So my own faith in my parenting skills wasn't very high, and I asked myself, when I sat down with the paperwork for your guardianship, whether this was a good idea." Jason frowned. He wasn't seeing the humor here.

"Then I thought about the room you showed me, and your life expectancy on Crime Alley, and said to myself, *Oh well, even if he hates me in the end, I can't possibly make things worse.*"

Jason blinked.

And then he *was* laughing, full throated, lung-heaving guffaws that bent him over until he slapped the blood-stiffened fabric on his knees. It hurt just like hope but it was a good hurt, not scraping at scars or tearing off scabs. More like a broken bone realigning.

And like the slip-lock of cleanly broken bone it ended quickly, and he straightened up, let himself grin at Batman, all the sharp edges and old wounds but also all the yearning weakness and bleeding gaps in his armor and that helpless fondness he'd been drowning out for so long it felt foreign. "You're right," he allowed. "That is pretty funny."

Bruce made a face at that, a weird one that Jason figured meant he was remembering something—ten to one it involved the Joker and he *was not asking*, okay—and then smiled again, not quite *that smile* but still.

*Had* Bruce managed to make things worse? Maybe Jason would have lived to adulthood, if Bruce hadn't taken him home. If he hadn't had Robin's reputation to make him that little bit more overconfident, to bring him that little bit more to a psycho's attention.

On the other hand, he could still really *easily* have wound up surrounded by larger men, pinned down and broken until he couldn't fight back. That wasn't a scenario unique to crimefighting. And there were worse ways to die than being beaten and burned, there were even worse reasons to die that way than betrayal. Bruce had given him more of a fighting chance than he ever would have had on his own.

In the end, it had been his choice to try to tackle what had become the final problem *on his own*. He'd had the option of waiting for his partner to back him up. He'd never had that, on the street where hope went to die.

And if he *had* lived to adulthood out there in Crime Alley, maybe he'd never have killed anyone. Almost for sure, he'd never have gained the skills to kill *that many* people, even if he'd cracked up and gotten his hands on military surplus gear and gone into one of the Black Mask's hideouts spraying bullets. But he'd never have *saved* nearly as many, either. Not if he'd tried his whole life.

Maybe Batman hadn't really changed anything for him. Maybe it was his destiny, to die young and bloody and stupid, to wind up falling off the narrow line strung between good man and monster on the crooked streets of Gotham. Maybe it had to be like this, Earth-15's annoyingly skilled Batman notwithstanding.

Or maybe it was up to him to decide.

"You should have it out with Leslie," he remarked, slouching back against the wall as though there had been no emotional debridement over Nightwing's hospital bed. When Batman gave him a dubious, sidelong look, he defended his statement with, "Hey, it is strictly freaky how many of the same issues she has about you as you do about us." *Me*, he'd been going to say, but it cut itself off before it got there. The meaning would get through.

Bruce tipped his head contemplatively. "I don't believe I have the resources to 'have it out' with anyone else today. I should confer with her about Dick's condition, though." His voice turned distinctly wry. "I will practice being civil."

"You can be civil to more than one person per day? Guess old dogs *can* learn new tricks."

Batman's lips pursed at him in a dizzyingly familiar refusal to laugh, and he pulled up the cowl and vanished inside himself. "I'll be right back," he said, sweeping toward the door. Turned, before he opened it. "Jason," he said seriously. "Are you sure?"

"I'm actually sorry, if that's what you mean." Batman didn't turn away, like that was somehow unsatisfactory, and Jason huffed in annoyance. "Are *you*?"

"Yes." Short, sharp, somehow reassuring. Apologies Bruce forced on him were annoying, but being able to demand confirmation of emotion from Batman—well, it wouldn't last. Well, *maybe* in therapy?

"I'm ready to keep talking whenever you are," Jason challenged.

"Later," said Bruce, and sounded like he might mean it.

Family therapy with Batman was going to go *right* up there with being rescued by good-Joker and beaten up by himself in a Batsuit, on Jason's life record of the surreal.

...his life was kind of weird.

(Maybe, in eight weeks, if they kept it together long enough for this thing to actually happen, Jason would get up the courage to ask just how much Bruce really forgave him for.)

Victory decisive, Batman slipped out into the corridor. With him gone, hanging around on the far side of the room from Nightwing seemed silly, and he walked over. The inside of his head felt—delicate. Like a heap of wineglasses, which if destabilized would start falling and shattering and crushing one another, but which for now were balanced with a distribution of forces that left everything not already broken reasonably intact. Or at least not actively falling apart.

He stared down onto Grayson's face in its silly little mask. Embarrassing as it had been, it was probably a good thing he'd caught some sleep earlier. Today felt like it had lasted about a million years.

"So here I am. Back to playing nursemaid—" Jason saw eyelashes flicker and raised his voice a little as he corrected the rest of his sentence to, "to *certain jackasses* who thought they could just go and *die* and leave *me* holding the bag of baby birds."

A smile stole its way onto Dick's battered face, and only then did his eyes actually come open. Half-masted and glazed from drugs or pain or both, but still looking more alert than last time Jason had seen him awake. When he'd had to be reminded that Jason wasn't dead anymore. Almost as awake as he'd been handing out his last pronouncements and dying messages on the battlefield like an aspiring martyr. Tough cookies, he was going to have to try for his sainthood again another day.

"You were right, by the way," Jason informed the patient. "Replacement is a moron."

"I said that?" Grayson asked blurrily, and blinked hard, like he was trying to wake himself the rest of the way up.

“Well, not exactly. But while you were playing hooky from the land of the living, I had to bribe him to *go home and sleep*. Like enforcing naptime on a five-year-old, I swear.” He sighed. “Anyway. Welcome back.”

Dick’s eyes had grown alert enough to twinkle. “Welcome back yourself,” he said. “Little Wing.”

Now *there* was a nickname he absolutely, totally hadn’t missed. And *welcome back*, huh? He narrowed his eyes. “How long were you awake?”

“Since around when nobody’s perfect,” Dick admitted. “I just faked with everything I had. No way was I interrupting *that*.”

Jason frowned into Grayson’s dopey morphine expression and the all-too-alert smug look in his eyes. “What, you think this is *actually* going to work?”

“Jaybird, there is *no* way I’m letting this fail.”

“Why do you even *care*?” Most of the sharpness was missing from the snarl, and his voice was oddly small. “I’ve tried to kill you all.”

Dick tried to shrug, cringed, and said, “You’re sorry. Family can get kind of messy. That doesn’t make it less important. You know how your memorial is still up in the cave?”

Jason tensed a little. Bluebird had a hell of a way of *not* letting this fail. “Yeah.”

“Because you came back, but you didn’t come home.” He paused, and then added, in a quieter voice, like he was half talking to himself, “I didn’t really get it until I watched Roy go through the same thing and looked back to compare, but I think...he’s been waiting for you to come home all along. He knew it couldn’t happen, but...”

But he never finished grieving. And then it turned out it *should* have been possible, and it still wasn’t.

“And here I thought it was cuz it’s *actually* a monument to his guilt complex and has nothing to do with me at all.”

Dick snorted, with some care, and the wobbly smile actually widened. “Well. Yeah. That too, a little. But mostly. You didn’t come back.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “I get it already; I’m a giant douchebag. So are the rest of you, is all I’m saying.”

“Ah, brotherhood. A balm to soothe all wounds.”

Jason smirked. “So I guess you slept through the part where Bats and I agreed you’re a manipulative little bitch.”

Nightwing’s mouth dropped open, drew into an offended O, and then he closed his eyes and shook with silent laughter. “Ow,” he got out after a few seconds, opening one slightly

watering eye to peer at Jason. “Well, as long as you’re agreeing about something, I guess.”

Jason pressed his hand over what he knew to be a relatively unbruised section of Grayson’s shoulder. “Thanks,” he said quietly. He wouldn’t say it again.

Nightwing beamed, one of the bandages on his face pulling away from the skin. “Any time, Little Wing.”

“I’m taller than you are, dammit.”

“Little brothers are little *forever*.”

“If you were any less of an invalid, I’d hit you.”

“Just give the pretty face a chance to heal up.”

“Who’s pretty here, Grayson? Cuz it’s not you. Not even a little bit.”

The tip of Dick’s tongue poked out in response, because Nightwing was secretly five years old and couldn’t get his mouth wide enough to stick out the whole thing, and Jason rolled his eyes. That gravelly voice was getting to him. “You want a straw, or ice chips?”

“Ice. Please.”

Jason nodded, and went to find ice, and possibly a clock.

It turned out, clock located, that he’d slept a little over three hours, which meant Grayson had been out for seven of his predicted eight to ten, because he was stubborn and stupid and had had *way* too much opportunity to build up tolerance to most common anesthetics.

Jason found a nurse—not Rourdan—coming out of the room two doors down, where the dreadlocked kid from the ambulance was conked out with his three broken limbs all dangling in suspension, and told her Nightwing in #27 was awake ahead of schedule and required ice chips. Batman, he found standing with Leslie in one of the transparent tube-tunnels that ran between sections of the base. He paused for a second, looking at the way they stood close enough together that Leslie had to tip her head way back and Bruce had to duck his, and then swung inside.

“Hey,” he said, his voice made weird and flat by the narrow space bounded by flexible plastic. Rubbed the back of his neck in discomfort when both of them flicked their attention to him. “Uh, Big Bird woke up. There’s a pretty nurse in with him now, feeding him ice, but. He’ll probably be expecting you.”

Left it purposely unclear which of them he was speaking to; wasn’t totally surprised when it was Bruce who broke out of the tableau first, heading toward the recovery module. Jason was deciding between stepping out of the way and turning around to play tour guide like Batman didn’t know where he was going, when Leslie said, “It’s still true, you know. I left the city for Stephanie, but I’ll stay for you. Again.”

Jason had a perfect view of Bruce's face, in spite of the mask, as he froze in place halfway up the tube, just for a second, his mouth all tight and flat, and if you had any experience with masked faces, you could tell he closed his eyes.

Then, "Thank you," flat and nearly cold and without using her name, even though she didn't have a secret ID to protect, and he strode off, past Jason who only just wove out of the way. He shot a glare at the end of the Bat's vanishing cape, not so much because he'd been an asshole—he'd outright *admitted* he was emotionally wrung out and done making nice for the day—as because he resented that *Bruce* apparently had the resolve to stride away from parental figures saying things like that. Maybe it got easier by the time you were fifty, or maybe Jason was just a soft touch under all the snarl. Whatever. He arched an eyebrow at Leslie, who looked wry.

"It's not the kind of thing you can fix in one day," she said, and Jason had no idea how much she knew or had guessed about him and Bruce and what they'd spent, god, forty minutes or so in that white plastic cube talking to death.

"Yeah," he agreed, with a rolling shrug. Rome wasn't built, and all that. Then grinned. "Say, *how* old was B when you gave up on therapy?"

Ten, as it turned out. Dammit.

In the end, he didn't go back to Dick's room before he left. Now that the birdie was awake, it was just going to get crowded, and his stint of guard duty was over. Better catch the next copter out of here before anything had the chance to go wrong. This place was probably still within the borders of Pennsylvania; he'd get back to Philly, pick up the stuff from his hotel room, and send Drake a report on events in Caldera Epsilon. (Just to be a shit, Jason planned to include helpful feedback on the toilet block and free vending machines. The extra typing time was totally worth the face his Replacement would make.)

Dammit, he was going to have to contact someone other than Drake to confirm how many hours the asshole had spent sleeping.

He should get a cell phone again.

It was a close thing, which showed how much his head was *not* in the game right now, but he remembered to stop by Ops to get his stuff back on the way to the landing pad. The desk was being manned by a little guy in glasses so thick he was either pretty much blind or hadn't heard that lens-grinding technology had advanced since the sixties, and he scratched at his hairline and squinted at his register when Jason asked for his stuff under the name 'Red Hood.' After about thirty seconds of watching the guy scroll up and down, Jason started to tap his foot meaningfully. It wasn't like he had a sentimental attachment to these specific weapons, though the ambidextrous safety-trigger on the selective-fire Beretta was nice, considering how often he needed to shoot left-handed on short notice, and kind of hard to find.

His funds weren't actually bottomless, either, since he'd rejected Talia's patronage *and* gotten out of the drug lord business. And he didn't think it would be in good taste to spend the probable upcoming Batman bribe money on guns.

“I’ve got a ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ here,” the clerk offered doubtfully, after a little longer.

And now Jason laughed again, laughter that didn’t rip itself from his throat or go along with any of those tearing, settling sensations deep in his chest. Laughed so hard, for so long, that glasses guy started surreptitiously checking the distance to get his hand on his emergency button. Jason waved him off, straightening up and reaching for the stylus to authenticate his brand new alias, still chuckling. Well played, Rourdan.

Well played.

## Chapter End Notes

Leslie’s cryptic comment at the end of her scene references a conversation she and Bruce had during No Man’s Land.

In the ADitF flashback, one of the things that happened in between Jason hitting Batman with a tire iron and Bruce Wayne taking in a new orphan was a visit to Jason’s squat. Which appeared to be an actual room in an actual building, and in pretty good repair, but not at all homey. On a less canon-related note, ambidextrous safety triggers should be more common, dammit. Equipment suitable for left-handed use can be hard to find, and since Jason likes to go in guns akimbo, I figure he would value that feature.

In 'The Cult,' after Jason gets Bruce out of said cult and they retreat to regroup while the Deacon takes over Gotham, Bruce describes his internal condition as 'broken glass.'  
(‘The Cult’ and ‘The Killing Joke’ together constituted basically the first rehearsal for the next twenty-odd years of Batman torture, I think.)



# Epilogue: So Right For Me

## Chapter Notes

IT IS FINISHED.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He came to the back door, in the end.

Not out of shyness, or because the front door looked down over such a wide open space that even the best ninja couldn't sneak up on it, or even to show off that he could get through the security, because he'd been gone long enough that he probably actually *couldn't* without tripping *some* kind of sensor, which was why he'd made a point of being seen by a camera on his way to the house so they knew it was him, and nobody went into high alert thinking he was a League of Shadows minion here to kidnap the brat or something. (Though seriously, who would bother.)

But no, he came to the back door because it was *his*. The Manor was far enough from *everything* that if you were going anywhere you went by car, and in that case you either met Alfred in the front drive or shot down an underground tunnel, depending.

But when he'd lived here, when *he'd* gone in and out, on his own, to roam the grounds or venture outside them on foot or by bike, he'd used this door, the little one by the kitchen, with a little flagstone path running along the herb garden, ending at the little iron gate, set into a low stone wall not intended to keep out anything larger than a rabbit. He used to vault the wall instead of bothering to unlatch the gate.

It had been nine weeks and three days since he'd left field hospital Caldera Epsilon. No one was expecting him. They'd know, at this point, if he turned around and left, but it wasn't like there was anything they could do about it.

He bent forward and unlatched the gate. Left it open behind him. Two of the flagstones had cracked down the middle since his day. The bed of sage was looking riotous and the thyme was overspilling its border—the herb garden was always the first thing to fall into neglect when Alfred was busy, because it was his private domain and out-of-bounds to the weekly grounds crew. There were no weeds showing, but he hadn't been trimming anything.

The sage was upthrusting its purple-blossomed spikes, and Jason hung there, a few steps from the doorway. Reached out and bruised a sage leaf, breathed in the smell. Sage always smelled *old* to him, the way the heavy hardwood furniture or the books in the library did. A clean sort of old that wasn't threatening to rot.

"Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," he muttered. But the man in the poem had been an old migrant farm hand, dragging himself to the kindest of his

employers so he didn't have to die entirely alone. Jason didn't *have* to be here. He didn't need anything from them.

And they didn't have to let him in.

"I would have called it, rather, something you haven't somehow to deserve," replied a trim, British voice, and then the kitchen door swung open and there was Alfred, in shirtsleeves and his white apron, thinner and greyer than ever, but very much himself.

Jason grinned crookedly at the old man. There were traces of flour on his hands, and he could smell cinnamon. "American poetry, Alfie? I'm surprised at you."

"Well, I *have* spent some forty years on New English soil. We are perhaps not separated *entirely* by our common language, Master Jason."

And with that gentle use of title, reality raced back and Jason found he'd lost the ability to breathe, because if he'd had a hard time facing *Leslie*, even before he'd started to seriously doubt his own reasoning...

He'd hated Alfred sometimes, for his stiff judgy face and the way he would always, always side with Bruce, who held his first loyalties, and the delicate uncomprehending horror with which he'd treated some of Jason's street-bred habits and attitudes. He distinctly remembered thinking that the proper class-conscious butler was probably glad not to have to deal with a filthy urchin anymore, shortly after he'd made the decision to stay 'dead' until he was ready to make his move and try to break Batman.

It had never been true, had it?

"I guess you're pretty mad at me," he said, reduced to fourteen years old again, sheepish under the butler's dry gaze.

"There does, I believe, exist a rule requiring you to telephone if you are going to be delayed in returning home," Alfred replied.

Jason choked out a laugh. If *only* all he had to deal with was the biggest curfew infraction in history. "Yeah. Yeah, I forgot to do that. Sorry."

It would really have ruined the drama, he thought, if he'd called the Manor to say *Hey, Bruce, I'm doing a world training tour on Talia al Ghul's dime, but I'll be back to kill you before I turn twenty-one, okay?*

"Forgiven," Alfred said, and almost managed to make it sound like he really was just talking about a broken curfew. "Well, do come in. Wipe your feet," Alfred directed, falling back into the house and beckoning. Jason obediently wiped his feet on the mat (a braided hemp rope thing with a design of ivy vines; no 'welcome' here—equal parts Alfred's sense of taste and Bruce's paranoia) and stepped up over the threshold.

---

*Break.*

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Alfred offered him food almost as soon as he was inside—"might care to fortify yourself with an early lunch"—and Jason accepted because *Alfred's cooking*. And also an excuse to skulk around down here and put off finding Bruce and dealing with that confrontation.

Constructing a thick sandwich full of greens and scallions and thin-sliced tomatoes, and that expensive brown mustard, and sharp cheese, and strips of cold pork from last night's roast was the work of a few minutes, and then Alfred went back to rolling up cinnamon buns and Jason sat down at the little kitchen table to eat.

He'd demolished about half the sandwich when the door to the dining room swung open. The master of the house shambled in—okay, it was a perfectly normal walk, but he was utterly out of costume and not looking particularly put-together so it *felt* like a shamble—and came to a halt mid-yawn, hand frozen in the air in front of his mouth.

He was wearing pajamas and that stupid purple bathrobe—actually it was probably a similar-looking replacement; after ten years the old one would be kind of shabby, but it was the same shade of slightly reddish purple and made him look just as harmless as it always had. Or maybe that was the wide, startled look in his eyes. Or the wild thatch of bedhead. Whoever was keeping an eye on the security footage he'd made such a point of appearing on, it definitely hadn't been Bruce.

Under that stare, Jason felt his gut churn. It had been months, since the hospital. Plenty of time to reconsider. He knew how much could go down around here in a few months; had heard about some of it from his Replacement. Killer Croc was dead, killed by falling, of all things; apparently Robin had dutifully attempted to save the villain but hadn't had the necessary physical strength, and had been utterly unmoved by his own failure.

Bruce was in a different frame of mind, now, would have a different perspective on the matter of his second former sidekick than he'd had nine weeks ago, standing over Nightwing's hospital bed.

Jason had held it together for more than two months without going on any kind of killing spree, even a little one, and discovering just how *hard* that had been had freaked him out enough that he wasn't sure he wanted to break the streak, but if this fell apart now he wasn't going to be able to help it. And while he was pretty sure he was never going to come apart hard enough to lose the ability to focus his violence on people who deserved it, *pretty sure* wasn't *completely*, and what Leslie had said about knowing what people deserved had kept gnawing at his mind but he didn't think it would be able to stop him, if it came down to it.

Which led to the conclusion that he possibly *actually belonged in Arkham*, but if Batman put him there again...

"Hey," was what he managed to say, with a little wave. There was mustard on his thumb. He'd gotten to his feet without noticing.

"The prodigal returns, Master Bruce," Alfred murmured, sliding a tray of rolls into the glowing oven.

*For this my son was dead, and is alive again.*

"Jason," Bruce said. There was something disbelieving in his eyes.

*Was lost, and is found.*

Jason tugged his left hand out of his pocket and held both of them up, out to the sides, fingers spread far apart. *I'm not here for a fight.*

Bruce's hands twitched, but didn't go for weapons or up into a guard stance. He took a step forward. Seemed to pull himself back, after that, though he held his actual ground.

"I'm here," Jason said, and this time he didn't manage casual. He sounded just as uncertain as he actually was, *fuck*.

And Bruce tightened his jaw and strode forward. Jason had a second to register that he was cornered against the table, and think that Bruce couldn't possibly plan to start a fight *now*, after all that effort to get him here, right in front of Alfred, in his *goddamn bathrobe*, and wonder what people had been telling Batman about him while he'd been lying low, before Bruce was on him—

And that was not the world's worst grapple, it was a *hug*. "You're here," Bruce confirmed.

The last time Bruce had done this, Jason's forehead had rested against his sternum. Now he had to let his head drop so it could land on a shoulder, but Bruce had hugged him over the biceps like he was still taller by at least a foot, so Jason slowly bent his elbows up and folded his arms around Bruce's floating ribs. His eyes were burning.

"Shh," Bruce said, when Jason's breath hitched. "It's alright, Jay. Everything's going to be okay. You're home."

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*Break.*

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"Sorry I'm late," said Jason. It was a ritual, by now; at least one of them was always late. He tossed his helmet onto the fourth, unclaimed comfy chair and flopped down into his own. "I have a really good excuse, though. Bruce, you will be happy to hear the Westward Bridge was not destroyed by acid-breathing bees. Also, I need my own flamethrower. *Need.*"

"Christmas list," said Bruce. Jason rolled his eyes, and Dr. Ming leaned forward, ready to hear about the bees and then see if it reminded either of them of something that had happened in the past. So far, that had been the best way to get them talking.

Jason wasn't sure if it was the 'therapy' part that was actually making life seem brighter, or the 'acting like he had a future' part, but he was totally convinced *Bruce* was benefitting from being prodded into talking about things. And maybe they should give in and let Dr. Ming schedule them for some non-joint sessions already.

Except the thing was, irrational as it was on so many levels, Jason felt a lot safer being vulnerable, knowing Bruce was there to have his back. (And got more satisfaction out of expressing his various rage issues with Bruce there to hear. The shrink kept having to talk him down from posturing. He was starting to hear her mild *Do you really mean that?* when she wasn't even present. It was very annoying.)

Three-man sessions, with one of the other guys thrown in, were always *hilarious*. Especially the time Timmy heroically rescued a beautiful example of thirteenth-century pottery from Dr. Ming's bookcase before it could be smashed by a flying paperweight. She kept nothing breakable in here anymore.

At some point, they were going to have to try all five of them at the same time. Jason was betting violence would break out before anybody got to the point of tears. (Barbara had refused to take the bet because, she said, he would *be* there, so he could guarantee his win by punching somebody if anyone started to look weepy, and she had no intention of losing money just to contribute to delinquency.)

---

*Break.*

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He'd come to the satisfying realization, over the past couple of months, that no one was going to hassle him about breaking any number of bones he wanted. (Unless it meant they passed out before you could get the information you wanted, but after working solo so long he *understood* that hang-up, now.) This was a weird form of adulthood, but he'd take it. Or maybe this was the power of lowered expectations.

All the same, there are days when you break all a meth dealer's limbs and a lot of his phalanges and blow up his lab, and then there are days when you wind up giving a stupidly detailed lecture about the horrible stuff street drugs get cut with and why, in addition, tripping on cough syrup is also extremely dumb, just not as dumb as believing you can get a tab of actual ecstasy on a street corner in this century.

High school students seemed to be significantly more likely to pay attention to this kind of lecture when it was delivered by the guy their dealer just ran away from really fast. The cool jacket obviously helped. Also the liberal use of profanity.

(Take that, Alfred.)

Also, *decriminalize marijuana in this state already*, jeezus, dumb kids thinking if one controlled substance was that harmless why not try the others, clearly it was all just adult melodrama. It was mostly dangerous because it was a gateway drug, but it was *more* of a gateway drug by being illegal. Leslie had a point that he *probably* wouldn't even kneecap a guy for selling teenagers beer, even though that was totally illegal to do and being drunk got so many people killed.

But there was pot, and then there were hard drugs, and there were teenagers, and then there were twelve-year-olds.

"Look, you guys are on your first strike now," Jason said. The knot of dealers he'd linked to the middle-and-high-school trade for this neighborhood was looking at him with a gratifying amount of fear. "But I'm planning to go home for Thanksgiving this year, and if I kill you before that, it'll make things really awkward. So if you screw up and make me have to hunt you down and cut your heads off with a hacksaw, I'm going to be *really pissed*, and that means I'll make sure not to kill you clean."

The one furthest to the left looked prepared to vomit. Jason propped the machete in his left hand over his left shoulder in what he thought was a suitably casual pose. His semiautomatic was hanging out somewhere around the vicinity of their knees. He kind of hoped one of them made a break for it. "Do we have an understanding here, guys? Don't make me kill you before the end of November."

"Christmas is a month after that," piped up the stringy crazy one in the front—Jacques, apparently, Jason gathered from the horrified hissing of the guy next to him. He was going to be a problem. Hopefully he'd get himself dumped in the river before he made his way too far up the hierarchy.

Jason rolled his eyes. "I'm not going home for *Christmas*, what do I look like, a college kid?" Alfred was going to try to guilt him into it, he knew. He planned to leave town in plenty of time to avoid last-minute weakness. "Wait until after Thanksgiving to screw up, and we can just have the normal level of gore. Capisce?"

---

*Break.*

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"Hey there, Nest Egg," Jason greeted, sliding his tray onto the surface of the table. The executive cafeteria at Wayne Tower pretended to be a restaurant, which was in his opinion just tacky, and he wondered if his target of the moment was eating down here in normal-worker-land instead because it annoyed him too, or to avoid getting buttonholed into an impromptu lunch meeting, or to protect his *invited* guest from exposure to executives. (Bruce's might have a slightly lower slime quotient than average, but it was still pretty bad.) Maybe all three.

Drake looked up from his baked ziti with a longsuffering expression. "Are you ever going to call me by my actual name?"

"Nope." The breadrolls that went with the ziti were actually fresh. Jason broke his in half and smeared butter over the inside.

Replacement rolled his eyes. "Steph, meet Jason. Jason, this is Stephanie," he said.

"Yeah, I know." Jason shoved half his roll into his mouth and raised one hand, palm out. "Put 'er there."

To her credit, the blonde only hesitated a split second, and when the high-five landed without provoking an explosion of poison gas or a massive electrical shock, she grinned. He swallowed the bread and grinned back. He had preemptively decided she was going to be his favorite, and so far he hadn't seen anything to make him take it back.

"What are you doing here?" Drake asked. Not especially confrontationally, more like he was admitting his detective skills were not up to the task of figuring Jason out and throwing in the towel with an actual question.

"What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here?"

"I have a job."

"You're being exploited. Go back to school. But that aside, what are *you* doing here?" he addressed this to Stephanie, who was obviously trying not to laugh at them.

She shook her head. "You answer first."

"Okay. Hey, Replacement, I wanna jump the line to get a project considered by the Wayne Foundation."

Drake looked wary, but not as unwelcoming toward the concept as Jason would have expected. Note to self: shamelessness was a good approach with this guy. He smirked. "See, it's like this..."

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*Break.*

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"...thing is, I never blamed her, my mom. Catherine. It wasn't like she started doping for fun. After the insurance ran out there was nothing left to do but die, and she had me so she had to wring every working second out or I'm pretty sure she'd have made it fast about halfway through, when the pain got too bad. But the morphine they had her on before the coverage lapsed, that helped, so she went street for it, and then..." He shook his head, and didn't look up from his hands. "I never, ever blamed her."

"But you were angry," Dr. Ming said. Not smug at figuring him out, and not condemning him. It was—good, she was good at this.

"Of course I was angry! There was a hell of a lot to be angry at." His hands twisted together as he watched them, and he gritted his teeth. He wasn't used to his body doing things he hadn't told it to, except in a fight, and that was different, that was trained reflex. "But yeah," he whispered. "I think I was angry at her, too. For giving in. For running up those debts. For...for leaving me alone."

"You know that was okay, don't you? Feeling like that. There was nothing wrong with that."

Jason's fingernails dug into the back of the opposite hand. "Yeah. Yeah, I know."

"But you didn't then? I'm just guessing."

"Good guesses," Jason grumbled. "Yeah, I—I never *let* myself be mad at her, maybe. And later, when—after what Sheila did. I didn't get mad. I probably would've, if we'd lived. But maybe not. It was a pretty strong habit. Not blaming Mom. She wasn't strong enough. You can't go around punishing everybody who isn't strong enough to take everything the world throws at them."

When he glanced up the therapist was smiling at him, like she liked what he'd said. He ran back over it in his head, to make sure he'd meant it, and—yeah, okay.

It was kind of childish and he could see how easy it would be to use against him—Leslie probably wouldn't be able to help herself, which he guessed was why they had uninvolved-third-party Ming—but it was nothing but honest. Victim-blaming pissed him off like nothing else.

"I was mad," he repeated. That was nothing they hadn't been over before, with and without Bruce in the room, but it was like fighting, really—the first time you did a move, you were never going to get it exactly right. That took practice. You could always eke out a little more efficiency of motion, a little more range, a little more control. "Especially after I came back. The—I still don't know how much of it was the Pit, you know? Maybe I never will. Being betrayed like that—but I did blame Bruce, you know? Not when I used to get hurt, but for letting me down. Even before I died, I'd gotten used to getting mad at him. It's...weird that I blamed him so much and them not at all, isn't it?"

"I don't know if it's weird," said the doctor. "Do you think maybe you focused on Bruce because he was a safe outlet? Someone strong enough to take whatever you could deal out?"

Jason smiled a little. "Aw, doctor. That would be nice to think. But if I'd been trying to lose, believe me..." He shook his head.

"That wasn't quite what I meant, but from what you've all told me, I think if you had really intended to destroy him, you could have."

Jason snorted. "He's indestructible."

"Really?"

All evidence suggested it was the case, up to and including Bruce taking a legendary one-hit-kill attack and then fighting his way back home against the fabric of spacetime instead of dying. But no. Jason knew not really. As good as Bruce was at picking himself up again and soldiering on, he had his limits. And Jason *could* have done more than he had to push him past them, even without crossing any extra lines like murdering the innocent. Could also have killed him plenty of times, if he'd really wanted that. (He'd never really wanted that.)

If he really *had* been unconsciously misdirecting some of his rage to protect women far too dead for him to hurt, then that was just embarrassing, but. But he couldn't say it didn't make sense.

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*Break.*



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"I'm not doing this for me," Jason said, rocking his knife back and forth in the wound. "You know? That was where I was getting it wrong before. Why I kept hesitating. Because I thought killing you would make it better. So I thought I had to get it *just right*. But my death wasn't *about* you. Getting better has nothing to do with you, either."

He planted his boot on the Joker's back, and yanked the K-BAR blade free from between the second and third lumbar vertebrae. The sound the clown made might have been either a scream or a laugh, or both. It was probably both. It echoed through the deserted garage, reverberating from the corrugated steel walls.

"I should've lit you on fire in that warehouse years ago," he reflected, lining up his next blow. "The first time our paths crossed. I had the resolution. I'd already gotten my hands bloody. Everybody you've hurt since then, that's on me. But you know—*nnff*," he broke off, as he braced one knee on concrete and put his whole back into stabbing the Joker's, "You know, it isn't. It's always been *you*. The one who actually does the evil shit. It's not our responsibility to kill you."

"It's one thing for *me* to say Batman should've—for *me*. When I hear strangers saying it, I get pissed off. Why don't they do it themselves, huh? They don't get to ask other people to do that kind of thing for them. People want someone killed to keep them safe, they should ask the *government*. They kill people all the damn time, they could've taken you out. Cops get issued guns for a reason, if there's ever been anyone they could've filled full of lead with clear consciences, it'd be you."

"They haven't yet, they're...what? Too chickenshit you'll survive and come after them? Or are you just too good at dodging?"

The Joker didn't answer. He had been, earlier; had come out with all kinds of disgusting shit that had helped keep Jason on-track, reminded him why he was doing this. (Made him have to fight to stay in control and not start stabbing wildly, but hey. He'd managed.) It was kind of comforting to know that even the Joker had a breaking point. A place where shock set in and blood loss laid him out and just breathing was an achievement.

"But tell me, why do people put it on the old man, huh? What makes 'em think they've got the right to just *expect* that from us? Even when I really, really hated him, I knew it was kind of a big deal to ask him to go there. And half the people who say it would give him the pariah treatment same as they did Wonder Woman, if he ever actually *did* it."

"Fucking assholes, the public, always wanting it both ways. *You* know how easy they are to lead around by the nose. I've watched you."

"Right, so," he concluded, finding his place just below the cervical vertebrae. "Nobody has the right to make me do this. But I said I was going to. I killed a lot of people who needed it a lot less. I *practiced* for this. I owe everybody you've fucked with since I *didn't* set you on fire to get this right."

*Stab.* The first one had been for him. The second, in the small of the back, had been for Barbara. After that he hadn't been specific. There weren't enough square *millimeters* of back,

let alone spine, for everybody who deserved this revenge.

With one last surge of force, he cut the medulla oblongata off from whatever nerve split off from the spinal cord to regulate the lungs, and the feat of breathing went beyond the clown's power.

Slowly, carefully, Jason drew the blade out of the Joker's back one more time. Stood up.

"You always survive," he said. "No matter how dead you should've been. We all know if we didn't see a body, or if we did and then it went missing, you'll be back.

"So survive *this*. Lie in a bed in Arkham, on a ventilator, and *live*."

Jason wiped down his combat knife, and stowed it away. Walked out the side door two minutes ahead of the ambulance. Didn't look back.

Leaned up against a wall, a dozen blocks away at the end of an avenue that ran straight and open far enough east that he could see the sun heaving itself out of the sea, and lit a cigarette. Just the one. For old time's sake.

It tasted like heat and dry things. Like memories that lingered, growing more sour and rancid as they faded away. Like betrayal in a desert, like sympathy and like pity, like every bitter thing that came with living.

"I forgive you, Mom," he whispered, squinting into the dawn.

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*Break.*

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Jason Todd was lying on his back on the roof of a shabby brownstone in Priest Heights, soaking up the sun. Nocturnal habits and a wanted listing meant a lot of skulking around in the dark, which was bad for vitamin D levels, which was bad for...what was it bad for? Bones, was that it?

Yesterday he'd had an amazingly passive-aggressive ninja birthday. Gifts had just sort of *turned up* at a couple of his bolt-holes, proving that the Bats knew where they were, which was both ninja and passive-aggressive.

After judicious bomb sweeps, unwrapping the packages had uncovered two different types of stun guns (really, thanks guys), a set of mixing bowls, an electric mixer, and a set of *good* kitchen knives (Alfred?), a new pair of boots, a collection of George Bernard Shaw (Barbara), a how-to manual on tire replacement and repair (he really hoped that one was from Bruce), and the Punisher T-shirt he was wearing right now.

It was a standard silk-screened piece of merchandising, with artful paint drips coming down the rocker skull to make it look amateurishly stenciled, which might mean it was a movie tie-in; Jason had never had time for comic books but he and Sasha had rented the movie, a few weeks before the clusterfuck of a night that had ended in his arrest, and it had turned out to be

pretty much the funniest thing ever. He was pretty sure the shirt was meant as the obvious jibe about his methods, from some Bat-brat or other, but it *could*, theoretically, be from Sasha, if somebody had tracked her down and invited her to join in their birthday game, or something.

Birthdays weren't even a big *thing* with the Bats. He bet Replacement had gotten, like, a hug from Dick and maybe a slice of pie for his twentieth. He smelled conspiracy.

A shadow fell across his face, and he had a bad second before he got his eyes open and identified its caster. She sank into a crouch as he lowered the gun he'd pulled in that second, her head cocked at a curious angle, utterly unthreatened.

Cassandra Cain. Black Bat, she was calling herself these days. Former Batgirl. Conscience-ridden child of assassins. Body language expert and off-and-on semi-mute. Brainwashed twice that he knew of. The child Lady Shiva had denied when Jason and Batman had pumped her full of truth serum a decade ago. (Which, interestingly, suggested that even if Sandra Wu San *had* been Jason's real mother, he'd probably never have known.)

They'd never really talked, or met outside a group except in passing when their patrol routes intersected, and she wasn't in costume, and it was the middle of the day. Either this wasn't a business visit, or the emergency was serious as *hell*. "Problem?" he asked, sitting up. He left the gun in his lap for now, but didn't let go of it; he knew he couldn't take her hand-to-hand, and just in case she was here on unfriendly terms, he'd hold onto his force multiplier.

Cain shook her head, glossy black hair swaying. "I'm late," she said. "Sorry."

Jason felt his eyebrows draw together. "Okay," he began, half-expecting her to run off to whatever she was late for without further communication. Then she held out a small box tied with a ribbon, and he recalculated. "Uh—thanks," he said, accepting the package and weighing it in his palm. Fairly heavy, for the size. "You know, I think you were supposed to hide this in my apartment while I was out," he remarked, deciding he could probably skip the bomb check in this case. She was *right there*. And she wasn't the type to blow a guy's hand off by treachery, anyway.

She shrugged, still squatting, eyes almost level with his. "Presents are...less fun, if I can't watch."

Made sense. Even if your first language wasn't body language, it made sense. Jason wished it didn't. He wasn't going to be able to fake liking whatever it was enough to fool her, and maybe he was getting pathetically soft but he didn't want to be a big letdown. He poked his tongue out the corner of his mouth and tugged away the paper.

Inside the box was...another box. This one was made of polished wood.

Cassandra looked expectant.

He opened the box.

It was... a wristwatch. Analogue. Quartz, not spring-powered. Nice, without being one of those absurd luxury pieces people like Bruce wore. The strap was good-quality leather, the hours were marked in Roman numerals, and taking up most of the watch face behind the three silver hands was a distinctly non-terrible painting of a blue bird in flight.

A blue *jay*. He looked up at Cassandra, knowing she probably knew more about how he felt about his present than *he* did. "Did you... is this a *pun*?"

She shrugged. "Told the man at the store I needed... a present for my brother. With a jay on it. Thought this was better than... cufflinks."

Jason snorted. "Definitely better than cufflinks." Where the fuck would he even wear cufflinks. He got cufflinks as a gift, he'd figure it was some kind of hint that he was about to be descended upon by a forced tailoring experience and dragged to some kind of WE benefit gala, or something. Not that he minded nice clothes, as such, but getting out of those awful parties of Bruce's was probably the best thing about having died. He snapped the box shut, figuring he'd wear it next time he was *relatively* sure he wasn't going to get in a fight that day. Not that it wouldn't get smashed or melted or burned or something eventually, but he'd like to wear it more than once. "Thanks," he said. Glad he was able to mean it.

Cassandra smiled, and he had the feeling she was reading his surprised relief that her gift had been good enough to like just as much as his actual genuine appreciation, but at least he wasn't required to try to *prove* he liked it by coming up with the correct words. Win, overall.

"Angry bird," she said abruptly. Which, he hadn't heard she was in the habit of renaming people, but it wouldn't surprise him, either. Rummaged in one of the pockets on her windbreaker for a second and came out with a fat, round, fire-engine-red stuffed *thing*, with a stubby orange beak and thick, black eyebrows drawn low and fierce. An *Angry Bird*, because when a digital phenomenon took off the obvious step was of course to sell toys.

"Uh, thanks," said Jason, considerably less convincingly, which he felt no regret over at all. He did let her hand it to him, though.

She grinned, and he realized that, deeply knowing eyes and genuine kindness and incredibly deadly hands and feet and language issues all notwithstanding, his only adoptive sister was a *gigantic troll*. "Not so angry now," stated Black Bat.

He threw the stuffed bird at her face. She ducked.

---

*Break.*

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"Hey, screw you!" Jason swung, and Bruce—the asshole, the creep, the *smug sonuvabitch*—let the blow land, snapping his head around to the right. That wasn't enough, not when it had been just *handed* to him, so he hit him again, an uppercut this time that Bruce still didn't block or dodge, but did roll back with—not willing to risk a concussion just for the sake of pacifying his crazy son, even safe in his cavernous home base.

Jason snapped a kick into the front of Bruce's thigh and wished he wasn't in costume, not so much because the armor made it hard to get a good blow in, but because he couldn't grab a handful of *Batman's* shirt and drag him close to shout in his face. Much as Bruce deserved a beating, laying it on an unresisting man wasn't—wouldn't make anyone listen to him. Or make him feel any better later. "This is just like before! Just like Garzonas!"

"We *don't have the evidence*." Batman grated the words out, standing strong like Jason never even hit him at all, and it really was just like back then. All they had was the victim testimony, and an injury, and what they saw with their own eyes.

"So *make* some!"

"You know I can't do that."

"So you're going to let him walk," Jason seethed. "Because your pretty little principles will let you commit all the B&E and invasion of privacy in the *world* but you *can't* falsify some goddamn evidence to put this jackass away. You think a beating is going to stop him? All it means is he'll kill the next girl, to shut her up!"

"You're angry," Bruce said. Which must be hinting at something because the world's *worst* detective would have picked up that little tidbit at least half an hour ago. Jason had not one drop of patience left to spend on unravelling Bruce's little indirect communications.

"Yes, I'm angry! I want to see this fucker crucified. *Literally*."

"This isn't ancient Rome."

Jason's lips curled back. "*Every* empire is Rome, your-highness-of-Gotham. And your little chunk of it could use more bread, less circuses!"

"What's wrong with circuses?" It was Dick's voice, at the top of the stairs up to the Manor, deceptively mild.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Oh, nothing. They just don't feed much of anybody but *clowns*." He jerked his eyes back to Bruce, teeth baring themselves again as he realized the subject had somehow changed under his feet. "And *he* wants to let that dog-and-pony-show marketing specialist Anderson walk, because *all we have* to link him to the assault is testimony. And the victim is just some Crime Alley slut, who's going to listen to a word she says?"

"I did not say—"

"This is *important*!" He was shouting now. "What's a bank robbery compared to this? Banks are insured! So long as nobody gets hurt, that's *nothing*! Just because the victims are weak and the bad guys are normal citizens with jobs, you think this kind of thing doesn't matter?"

Grayson again. "No one is saying that, Jason."

"*Fuck. You!*" Before he knew it he was moving. Wheeled around, snatching up the heaviest thing in reach—which was a strangely prosaic handheld fire extinguisher set near the chem bench—and rammed it full-strength into cold smooth glass.

It had been broken before. His Replacement had mentioned it, in passing. It would have been unsurprising if the current glass was reinforced, bulletproof, at *least* as shatter-resistant as your average windshield.

But no, it was simple, delicate crystalline glass, and Jason's first blow smashed straight through the case and took down the costume inside, everything except the mask.

He took that out on his next pass, and kept swinging until the largest shard left clinging to the frame was no bigger than his hand. Then he hurled the extinguisher into the center of the mess, on top of the glass-slashed little red tunic. Turned his back, like that would make it all vanish.

"Don't you *dare* fix it this time," he spat, and strode off, before anyone could say anything.

(Three days later, Anderson turned himself in for five counts of assault and rape, two of which had been reported. He had two broken bones and was missing several teeth. Later, he tried to retract his confession as made under duress, but it had included details of the known crime scenes that no one but the perpetrator should have known. And the victims, and anyone with access to the police files. He thought better of the attempt after a brief, mysterious power outage.

*You're sure*, Gordon said to Batman, on the roof of the police building. *He's guilty?* Because beating confessions out of people was nothing but bad policing, when it came down to it; information gained from torture was unreliable and the bad old days of the GCPD had seen a lot of people jailed for things they'd never done, because it got cases closed and people would confess to *anything*, if you hurt them enough.

*We were there*, Batman said, and while his word wasn't anything to the law it was enough for Jim. And that burned but leaving all the evils he couldn't fight untouched burned a little hotter, and so for as long as he trusted the Bat, this was how it would stay.

He didn't ask who *we* was, and Batman said nothing to Red Hood at all.)

All signs of the broken glass case had vanished entirely within three days, though it took almost a month for the Cave's inhabitants to stop detouring superstitiously around the spot. The Robin costume, or one like it, reappeared in another case in the row of cases full of old costumes, undifferentiated from the rest. And Bruce handed Jason the bronze plaque with his name on it, when they passed one day in the street, as though Bruce Wayne frequently strolled out of grocery stores in the worst parts of Gotham with no disguise but a cheap jacket.

Jason buried it in his grave.

---

*Break.*

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Alexandra 'Sasha' Russenko was an emancipated minor living in Maryland, about eighty miles from DC. She was seventeen and in her first semester of junior year, and every month

she received a maintenance check from what she said was the settlement money after her deadbeat stepdad got slammed in prison. They were actually automated payments from a nameless account Jason had filled with funds taken from people he killed; most of it was drug money. Sasha probably knew this, and gave no sign of minding.

She'd been kicked off the lacrosse team for repeated instances of excessive violence in practice and during games, so now she went straight home to her third-floor apartment after school. She had been doing homework at the desk in her bedroom for the last hour and a half. Closed a densely-marked sheet of graph paper inside her math book, set it aside, opened her laptop, and set her hands on the keyboard.

"Are you going to lurk all day?" she asked, instead of typing.

Jason grinned. "Busted," he admitted, stepping out from the cover of the door. He didn't step into her bedroom, but hung out in the doorway, forearm propped casually against the frame.

Sasha shot a look at him sidelong, her scars stretching around an unimpressed glare, but ran her finger over the mousepad, clicked something, and began to type, eyes fixed on her screen. "I thought you were staying away for my own good."

"Just thought I'd drop by," he shrugged. "I was discrete."

"Not a word that comes to mind when I think about you."

"Like you're one to talk." She still didn't smile back, and had kept her fingers moving so continuously while each of them talked that he wondered if she was just typing nonsense to keep up a pretense of occupation. "You doing okay?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Like you care."

"I care," Jason asserted. Surprised by how much that hurt. Shouldn't be surprised by her rejection itself, though. She hadn't wanted to split up or be fixed up with a normal life; she'd wanted to stick with him and keep fighting, damn all the risks and losses. *What goes around comes around*, Jason thought wryly. She'd be out on the streets again sooner or later, he knew; she'd gotten the bug under her skin. But hopefully by then she would have a real life to fall back on when the dark got too heavy.

Sasha set her jaw, dragged the mouse around the screen selecting a number of points with great ferocity, and resumed typing, even faster than before. "I hear Red Hood is working with Batman now," she said. Where she was picking up rumors like that, he didn't want to ask; hopefully just chatrooms. Timmy had a lot of less-talented successors dutifully sharing all their stalkery findings with the non-Gotham internet.

"That's... a bit of an overstatement," he replied, sheepish.

He and she had fought together against Batman and Robin, even if they'd been setting themselves up as rivals rather than full-bore enemies; she'd picked up his hatred. Robin had promised to save her from Pyg, after all. He'd failed. "I did wanna tell you, though, if you

keep your grades up you'll probably get offered a massive Wayne Foundation scholarship to any school that accepts you."

Sasha's hands fell silent on the keyboard. "So he is back," she said. He'd never really told her about his past, but he hadn't hidden anything, either. She'd read between the lines.

"He has this tendency to try to solve everything via his bank account, and he doesn't know you well enough to buy you a car."

"Has he bought you a car?"

Jason grimaced. "He'll probably try."

Sasha's mouth tightened. "I'm not for sale."

Jason couldn't help the grin that stretched across his face. He couldn't take credit for her, didn't have the right to be proud of her, but he *liked* her. Always had. They'd only ever been tied together by rage and vengeance and the sight of her putting down the empty shell that had once been her father. (It had been a mercy killing, Jason did not doubt that, and if there had also been some old resentment at work, he had never asked.)

"Think of it as a 'sorry my family got involved in your life' present," he advised. "Free stuff isn't usually one of his control mechanisms, it's more like a replacement for actual communication."

"My radio-silent ex-con sugar-daddy doesn't get to say that," Sasha announced, and then slammed the 'enter' key with two fingers and rolled her chair away from the computer to look at him. She smirked.

He grinned. "I do miss having you around to put me in my place."

---

*Break.*

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"I'm so tired of people dying," said Dick.

He sounded tired, too, his voice sort of scraped and small even though he was perfectly healthy. "Jason wasn't the first, but...I don't know, it sort of felt like after him, it was open season. They...kind of start to blur together, after a while. And it's easier to just stop trying to remember them the way they were when they were alive. But then when you do think about them you feel like such a *traitor*..."

Bruce reached over and wrapped his hand around Dick's arm, just above the wrist, and the younger man started, like he'd forgotten he wasn't alone, or at least that he wasn't alone with Astrid Ming. "For what it's worth," Bruce said, in that stupid diffident voice of his that Jason had always known was him being delicate but had at some point finally twigged was the Bruce Wayne equivalent of *nervous*, "I...think they'd understand."



Dick's face crinkled up weirdly and then flattened again, and he jerked his head away, but left his arm where it was. "I knew these people. You didn't."

"...you keep telling me I shouldn't try to make monuments of the dead."

"Well maybe that's just self-justification."

"*Guys*." Jason could kind of see why Ming wasn't saying anything, but that didn't mean he couldn't. They weren't really at a point where a fight could possibly help anything except his own blood pressure. "I think it's safe to say there's some kind of middle ground here, okay?"

---

*Break.*

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"*Dammit*, Todd," Robin snarled through the darkness. His voice had started breaking earlier this year and it was frequently hilarious, but now it was just rough and hoarse, and the crack in it could have been a lot of things besides hormones. "You are *not permitted* to die."

"What, from this?" Jason chuckled—carefully. "Look, I know you can't tell under all this crap, but I'm fine."

"You idiots need to stop trying to protect me."

"Sorry, D. You're the baby. It's...somewhere in the contract, I'm pretty sure." The building had started coming down around them pretty abruptly, and after they fell through the rotted floor during the first phase of collapse, he'd located the spot in the basement that had the best chance of staying clear, and kicked Robin over there before the whole ceiling gave.

Reflex. He'd have followed if he'd had time. Wasn't a fancy self-sacrifice gig, just bad luck.

"Tt. I *will* have you buried with an assortment of children's toys."

"Just bury me shallow," said Jason, who felt that six feet was much too deep to have to dig yourself out of twice, and then realized that wasn't the most tactful thing to say to a kid worried you were going to be crushed under most of a house, even if he'd brought up burial arrangements first. "I'm fine, though." Much more fine than he could have been, definitely. He could even feel his toes still. They weren't happy.

They could go on being unhappy all they liked so long as they kept talking. Babs might make a wheelchair look good, but it really wasn't him.

"I will also have that phrase added to your headstone."

"Stylin'," Jason grunted. Why would the brat even think that counted as a threat? His stone had nothing but a name and dates; Bruce had saved his dysfunctional epitaph for the Cave. A pithy morbid Jason quote about resurrection would make a *great* addition. (Jason Todd: 1989-2004; 2005-2015: '*Just bury me shallow*.' Heh. Yeah. 100% improved.) Or did he mean 'I'm fine?' Because that wasn't even *his* catchphrase. It was Drake's, if it was anyone's.

Bare fingers, cold and blunt and tipped with callus, poked him in the eye, which was fortunately closed against dust. Moved on before Jason could decide between one-liners, and poked him in the cheek instead before tracing down to his throat, settling over the pulse point, and staying there. "*Seriously*," Jason grouched, once he got over the cognitive dissonance of 'kid is seriously worried about me' crashing into 'pinned down in the dark *NINJA TOUCHING NECK*.' "Just fine."

"Which is why you haven't tried to force me to unhand you."

Jason's mouth twisted. Stupid intelligent teenagers. His right arm was totally pinned; he wasn't sure he dared try anything strenuous with his left. Ulna was possibly cracked, but more importantly, until he was sure his spine was okay, he wanted to keep his shoulders exactly where they were, to the millimeter. "I'm a little tied up, you might've noticed."

"Is that what they're calling it n—listen," Robin interrupted himself. "Did you hear that?"

"No." But then he did. A shifting, scraping noise above them, louder than the settling of the collapse that had been going on all along. Jason kept his breath even, and if there'd been somewhere safe from another collapse to go, would have told the brat to go there. But there wasn't. So he said nothing.

Robin was staring up at the point in the rubble the sound had come from. It came again. "Father?"

Such faith, Jason thought. Almost without bitterness.

More noise, and then light broke through. Another splintered beam was hauled to one side, and a stenciled blue bird was just visible in a patch of blackness. "Robin?" came a desperate, dust-choked voice. "Hood?"

"We're here, Grayson!" Damian called up, terrible as ever about codenames. "Todd is busy being slowly crushed to death, so if you would...!"

Hands in red gauntlets joined the blue, hauled debris aside with a mutter about proper leverage, and as Jason's vision went grey, a dark shadow swooped across the sun.

He felt a smile pulling at his mouth as he gulped another shallow breath, and darkness swallowed him. He wasn't worried at all.

His family was here.

---

*Break.*

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"For she's a jolly good fellow, for she's a jolly good fellow, for she's a jolly good feeeellooooooowwww...."

Damian punched Dick in the stomach in passing, cutting off his serenade, and Jason toasted the action from across the room. "Thank you, demon bird." Damian flipped him off, and

claimed the footstool that gave him the best line of sight to both Cass and the door. He wouldn't've accepted anything less than one of the wingbacked chairs, not that long ago. Jason thought it was the growth spurt. Robin was starting to take up enough space in his own right that he wasn't feeling the need to coopt impressive positions so much.

Or maybe it was a sign of emotional growth. Who knew.

"Which nobody can deny," Tim threw in, not singing, blasé as could be. Dick stopped holding his gut and looking pitiful, the better to stick his tongue out.

"Order in the peanut gallery," commanded Stephanie, more confident in her position than she'd been even a year ago. Jason had been all kinds of correct on insisting on inviting her to stuff like this, even if it had been mostly because he wanted an ally. And then Cass wrinkled her nose with laughter and Damian tutted, and Steph dissolved into giggles.

How anyone had believed Leslie could've killed this ridiculously *alive* girl just to prove a *point*, Jason couldn't imagine. But then, people did a lot of things you wouldn't have believed them capable of until they did them. He was glad she wasn't dead. He was glad both of them weren't dead.

It slammed into him, hard and golden and abrupt, how glad he was that he wasn't dead. That he was *gladtobealive*, here, now, today—he hadn't been, for a long time, but he *was* these days, he was glad about it and he wasn't even the only one.

Before he could get knocked too far sideways by that, the sound of Alfred's throat being cleared broke into his thoughts and everyone else's bickering, and the door toward the kitchen swung open, revealing Bruce juggling one-handed a stack of plates and cups and forks and cartons of ice cream and milk, and the long, thin knife that Alfred had been using on cakes since long before Jason first came to the Manor. Bruce let go of the knob and with two hands stabilized his load, and moved forward to set all the paraphernalia down, on the coffee table, clearing the way for Alfred to enter the room.

The cake he was carrying was low and white, sprinkled with shredded coconut, and the ring of candles gleaming on top just managed to gleam in the dimness created by closing all the curtains against the daylight.

"*Happy Birrrrrrthday to you,*" Dick started singing again, now safely out of reach of either of the brothers likely to hit him for it—fuck's sake the man was over thirty, he was seriously never going to grow up—and Steph was right there with him, and Tim joining in a beat behind, more quietly. Tim was smiling at Cass, one of his weird smiles, and Jason remembered suddenly that she had been *his* Batgirl, the way Steph was for Damian or Babs had been for him and Dick.

"*Happy Birthday Dear Cassie~~~!*"

Jason could maybe manage a hum.

"This is an unnecessarily elaborate production," Damian muttered, perfectly audible under the idiot singing vigilantes, and Jason's humming along.

"It's not every day a woman turns twenty-five," Babs muttered back.

*"Happy Birrrrthday to youuuuuu!"* finished the singers, defiantly cheerful.

"Make a wish, Blackbird," said Jason. His voice strangely soft in the sudden silence.

Cass leaned forward with stars in her eyes, and blew.

## Chapter End Notes

For the rest of us, Happy Midwinter! So much love and gratitude to everyone who's joined me and Jason on this trip, especially everyone whose reviews kept me working no matter how stubborn the boys got. :D I think it turned out pretty well, and it would never have been finished without you.

Final round of citations: Alfred and Jason quoted 'Death of the Hired Man' and the Gospel of Luke. The Punisher movie is the most eighties thing to happen in 2004 and you should watch it. (It exists in the DCU because shush. It could.) Felipe Garzonas is the rapist the second Robin may or may not have pushed off a balcony, and the time Jason didn't set the Joker on fire was in Lost Days.

And...that's it. The end. Wow. See you around?

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